

Summary: The things that happen when you're least expecting them...

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1. [Chapter 1](#) by EntreNous
2. [Chapter 2](#) by EntreNous
3. [Chapter 3](#) by EntreNous
4. [Chapter 4](#) by EntreNous
5. [Chapter 5](#) by EntreNous
6. [Chapter 6](#) by EntreNous
7. [Chapter 7](#) by EntreNous
8. [Chapter 8](#) by EntreNous
9. [Chapter 9](#) by EntreNous
10. [Chapter 10](#) by EntreNous
11. [Chapter 11](#) by EntreNous
12. [Chapter 12](#) by EntreNous
13. [Chapter 13](#) by EntreNous
14. [Chapter 14](#) by EntreNous
15. [Chapter 15](#) by EntreNous

Chapter 1 by EntreNous

"This is lame," Xander announced.

"Got that right," Spike said.

"Why can't Angel get his stupid packages himself? What's Giles doing being Angel's receiving service? And how come we're the ones that have to deliver the box? Do you realize how stupid we look trolley-ing this thing through the streets on a hand-cart?"

Spike sighed and shrugged further into his coat. "Look, we'll drop the big bad box off, then I can go get my blood at your place and you can go back to wallowing in that sad existence that you're calling a life these days."

"My life is not sad," Xander said with a frown.

"Got no bint. Not getting sex. Get fired every other week. Live in a glorified laundry room." Spike paused as he counted off the first four items on his hand, then brightened when he thought of the last. "Got no style whatsoever."

"Shows how much you know," Xander retorted. "I've had the same job for a couple of months now, and at the end of the month I'm moving in to a new place.

Signed the lease a week ago. Bye bye basement; hello semi-swanky bachelor pad."

"Cheeky!" Spike said. He grinned at Xander and tapped a cigarette out of its carton. "Moving on up then, are we? Won't forget about your old buddy Spike when you're tacking up your miserable comic book paraphernalia on the white walls of that soulless new apartment unit?"

"Whatever," Xander muttered. "At least I'm not living in a crypt."

Spike raised his eyebrows and wagged his tongue at Xander. "Hurt, really, I'm hurt that you can't drum up a better comeback than that."

Xander shot him a look, and Spike drew on his cigarette merrily as they finished the walk to the mansion in silence.

"End of the line," Xander said finally when they got to the steps leading down to the courtyard. "Either we lift the trolley or we carry the thing down by hand."

Spike cocked his head at the box. "Let's give it a go carrying it. Faster that way."

"Okay," Xander said, snapping the cords securing the box to the hand cart off. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Spike said through the cigarette dangling out of his mouth. "Heave . . ."

"Ho," Xander finished.

They lifted up the box rapidly and stumbled back, ending up sprawled on the pavement with the offending item on the ground between them.

"Hey!" Xander cried indignantly.

Spike rubbed his elbow and grabbed his still-lit cigarette from where it had landed, shoving it impatiently back into his mouth.

Xander pointed at the box and sputtered. "That doesn't weigh anything at all!"

Spike curled his lips in derision. "Thanks ever so for stating the obvious."

"The hell? Why the big production with the cart?"

Spike shrugged.

"This is nuts," Xander said. "I can carry that thing down there by myself."

"Yeah, but maybe I'm here to make sure the beasties don't get you," Spike said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Look, just wait here, okay?" Xander lifted the extremely-light box up and trudged down the stairs.

Spike just grinned and followed at his heels.

Xander set the box down and rapped at the door. Nothing. "Geez, he isn't even there. For all that, he's probably out of town or something, and this whole stupid trek -- aaaarrggghhh!!" he shouted when Spike tapped him on the shoulder suddenly. "Don't you ever follow directions?"

"Step aside while I open the door," Spike advised coolly.

"Fine. Guess we can just leave it here. Giles didn't say anything about a person-to-vampire delivery, so . . ." Xander muttered as he followed Spike inside. He set the box on the floor and brushed his hands off. "All right. Let's get out of here."

Spike toed the box with interest. "Aren't curious about what's inside?"

"No," Xander said, but he paused before he got the word out.

"Wonder if it's some sort of cape," Spike mused. "Can picture Angel swooping around here all by his lonesome, baring his fangs at motes of dust. Cape'd be light."

"And thank you for that nightmare image. It's probably nothing. Literally nothing, since it doesn't weigh more than the cardboard," Xander said firmly.

"Nothing, eh?" Spike ran a finger along the seam of the box. "No harm in opening it up then, is it?"

"Maybe," Xander said. He took a step closer to the box and Spike.

"Come on, then," Spike said. He grabbed Xander's hand and pulled him closer to the box. "We'll open it together. Go halves on anything worth taking."

"Not going to be anything to take," Xander insisted, but he skimmed his hand over the top and watched Spike expectantly.

"See, it's not even properly closed," Spike argued. Xander took a look at the heavily taped box with DO NOT OPEN written all over it and raised both eyebrows.

"There'd be a proper lock on it, and a tougher material than this, if it was something really dangerous," Spike explained.

"That does make sense," Xander said slowly. His hand went to his pocket and came out with a round of utility tape. "And I've got this -- forgot that I snagged it from work -- so we can shut it up again."

"There you go," Spike concluded. Xander took out his pocket knife, and Spike shook his hand to turn fingernails into talons, and they sliced the tape sealing the box quickly, meeting halfway and opening it the cardboard flaps together.

"Holy --"

"Christ --"

They looked at the box and then at each other.

"It's a bit of fluff," Spike said disbelievingly.

"Like a big ball of cotton-fluff," Xander agreed. "And . . . a bunch of glitter?"

"Sparklies," Spike confirmed. They looked at one another for a long moment, then burst out laughing.

"Is Angel going to make some . . . arts-and-crafts paper heart . . . with that . . . stuff?" Xander gasped out.

"What a sad sod!" Spike crowed.

"Maybe it's to get Buffy to be his . . . Valentine," Xander got out, and they laughed so hard that they held on to one another.

Spike wiped his eyes and Xander shook his head as they wound down. They grinned at each other while Xander taped the box back up nice and tight, and traipsed out into the night, occasionally lapsing into loud snorts and guffaws and leaning on one another for support.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 2 by EntreNous

Back at the basement, Spike poked around in the freezer for blood, and wordlessly accepted the mug that Xander handed him to heat up his dinner in the microwave.

Xander sprawled on the couch and turned on the television, eyeing Spike when he took a seat at the other end. "You staying?"

"Why not?" Spike shrugged. "Night's getting on . . . not much time to hunt down anything satisfyingly large and kill it before daybreak. Might as well stay here."

"Kay. Hey, Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"That was kind of hilarious . . . that stuff in the box at Angel's," Xander grinned at him.

"Was at that," Spike smirked back.

"What the hell was that fluffy shiny mess, do you think?" Xander asked. He resettled on the couch, ending up on the cushion next to Spike instead of at the other end.

"Dunno. Maybe Angel doesn't know what's in there. Giles say anything about what was inside?" Spike rested the top of his hand on Xander's thigh and stroked lightly.

"Nah. Just took a look at the thing and rounded us up for delivery detail." Xander shifted a closer to Spike so that their legs were touching.

"Oh, well, who cares," Spike said, running his palm along Xander's leg with a bit more pressure.

Xander gave a little sigh, and leaned towards Spike, who lifted his arm to rest around Xander's shoulders. "Well, it was funny anyway. And I'm so giving him hell for the glitter."

"You should. Became a right ponce once he decided to stay in Sunnydale with Buffy after all," Spike murmured into Xander's hair.

Xander turned to Spike and looked at him with widening eyes. "Do you think we should tell him we opened the box? Since it wasn't anything big in there anyway . . . I don't want him getting all avenge-y on us for no good reason."

Spike gazed at Xander's full lips and licked his own. "No use in it. Just let him find his bits of

shiny and fluffy on his own. No point in us getting involved."

"No point in us getting involved," Xander agreed shakily, his lips a breath away from Spike's mouth.

"Yeah," Spike murmured, and drew Xander's head closer to kiss him.

Spike's fingers threaded through Xander's hair as Xander's mouth moved back against his. Xander moaned slightly, parting his lips and shivering when Spike's tongue slipped through them, lightly stroking.

They pulled away from one another and stared.

"This should be really strange," Xander said wonderingly.

"Not though," Spike replied, diving back in to kiss his way up the side of Xander's neck.

"Oh, god," Xander croaked. "Just keep doing that, or . . . wait," he shoved Spike away, breathing hard.

"Well then," Spike said with a frown.

"Don't get all mad . . . I just want to . . ." Xander trailed off before reaching for Spike's shirt to unbutton it, running his hands along the thin t-shirt beneath.

"Nice, very nice," Spike said in a low voice, moving to pull Xander's t-shirt off and drawing that warm body flush to his own.

"Wow," Xander mumbled into the kiss, and Spike slipped his hands down into the waistband of Xander's jeans, kneading at the skin there. Xander cried out softly when Spike brought one hand to the front of his jeans, resting along the button fly. He thrust up against Spike's palm, deepening the kiss with enthusiasm.

"You know, easier doing this if we're more comfortable," Spike said reasonably when they drew apart, and they rose together to pull out the couch.

"Yeah . . . easier," Xander said as he crawled on to the fold-out bed and turned onto his back to face Spike.

Spike growled low and pounced.

Xander made a small noise of surprise, but then he was digging his nails into Spike's shoulders to bring him closer, crying out under Spike's thumbs scraping against his nipples, and squirming underneath Spike's hard body trying to increase the contact of skin-on-skin. He actually squeaked when Spike undid and pulled off his jeans along with his boxers in one swift motion.

Spike looked over the flushed boy splayed out front of him and his skin prickled with anticipation as he stripped off his own denim and shrugged the rest of the way out of his t-shirt. "Fuck, Xander . . . want to fuck you right now . . ."

"Go for it," Xander urged. He reached under the pillow and came up with a tube of lube, slapping it into Spike's palm.

Spike stopped suddenly, kneeling back on his heels and bringing the heel of his hand to his forehead. "Wait. Wait just a second. Wait."

"Hey," Xander said petulantly, sitting up to run his hands down Spike's chest. "Why did you stop?"

"Something's weird," Spike said weakly as Xander's right hand trailed down to cup his balls then slid up to stroke up along the underside of his cock. "It's too quick, it's . . . fuuuuck," he moaned out as Xander began to pull on him slowly with an up-over-down motion.

"Don't you want to?" Xander asked.

Spike shook his head, nodded, then shook his head again, but his hands kept creeping up Xander's thighs, pressing and caressing until he was rubbing Xander's groin gently around but not touching his cock.

"Not right, something's off, and I won't have you blaming me when . . ." Spike insisted for a moment, trailing off when he realized that he was actually turning down what was shaping up to be a really fine shag. "Yeah, okay," he said quickly.

Xander shifted so that he got his legs around Spike, then leaned back onto the bed, pulling Spike along with him. "Like this," he whispered as their cocks met and rubbed together.

"Want inside of you," Spike muttered.

"Yeah, want . . . please Spike, please . . ."

A kiss, a snap of plastic, a soft murmur.

"Fuck, so tight . . ."

"Uhh . . . another one . . ."

"Ohh yeah . . . like that, don't you?"

A whimper, a sudden intake of breath, a sharp cry.

"Do that part again!"

"What, this?"

A gasp. Laughter.

"I'm okay, I'm good -- more . . ."

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . fuck, that's right . . . just hold on to your legs there, love . . . ready?"

"Oh . . . my . . . god . . ."

"Oh, do that again, lovely . . . taking it so nicely, aren't you? Push back then, that's right."

"Can't last, can't . . ."

"S okay . . . so hot, baby, feel so good . . ."

"Aahh . . . kiss me again, now . . ."

Muffled cries.

"Fuck, love!"

A long pause.

"Wow . . . Spike?"

"What's that, pet?"

"What the hell just happened?"

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 3 by EntreNous

Spike rolled onto his back, one arm bent, hand cupping his head, and exhaled slowly. "I should think that'd be obvious."

He paused before reaching for his lighter and a cigarette, but as he'd already taken rather more important liberties with Xander he shrugged and lit up.

Xander's voice was muffled through his hands covering his face, but the words came through clearly enough. "Yeah, I get what happened. What with the touching and the thrusting and the . . . oh god . . . But I mean, what happened?"

"Told you something was off," Spike said. "I wanted to stop, but oh no, you wouldn't listen to me."

He twisted to face Xander, his jaw set. Damned if he was going to take the blame when he was the one urging them to think long and hard, holding off the encounter for . . . well, for almost a whole minute before getting back into the game. But he'd given it a try!

Xander stared straight up at the ceiling, but the expression he wore was just as determined. "Oh, so you were the one that wanted to stop? Need I remind you that you were also the one with the sexy touching on the couch and the really incredible kissing and the suggestions for getting more comfortable and then that truly inspired thing you did with your finger and then . . ." Xander trailed off when he realized that Spike was staring at him pointedly.

"Okay, I'm not making a good case for myself am I? So I liked it . . . I . . . obviously, you're really good . . . I mean, I've never done that, and not to sound rude but I'm not sure I would've picked you for . . . but knowing what I know now, you'd top the list . . . And again I say, the hell?"

There was a long silence. Spike stabbed out his cigarette in the mug still wet from the blood he'd had earlier.

"Look," Xander forced out. "I'm not upset or . . . I wanted it too, it's just . . . you have to admit that that came out of nowhere!"

"Well." Spike's voice dropped low, and he laid a flat palm on Xander's abdomen. "Maybe it did. Fact of the matter is, it happened. Had a bloody good time is all. Nothing wrong with that."

Xander sucked in a breath and nodded slightly. "Yeah. Okay."

"Right. There's no call for getting upset then." Spike skimmed his hand up and down the thin line of hair tracing a path from Xander's navel to his groin. He swiped away the remains of streaks of cum, and gently twirled a finger in the damp curls surrounding Xander's now softened cock.

Xander swallowed and turned his head, gazing at Spike uncertainly. "It was . . . okay?"

"More than," Spike replied.

"Yeah, I thought so too. But new to the whole man-sex thing, so . . . just wanted to check. Was over kind of fast," Xander said a little breathlessly.

"Good kind of fast, but yeah." Spike's eyes dropped to Xander's chest, and his hand rubbed slowly, working up and down from collarbone to the seam separating thigh from hip and back again.

"Maybe we should do it again," Xander said in a rush. "Just to be sure . . ."

"Perhaps we ought," Spike said almost formally.

They looked at each other curiously, then burst out laughing.

"This is crazy talk," Xander said. "To be sure of what?"

"Right! Off our gourds, somehow. Feel like I've had a few too many . . ."

"We're not drunk. We've just --"

"Gone funny."

"Um, yeah, I guess." Xander smiled tentatively at Spike and Spike flashed him a smirk.

A few deep breaths, a few more strokes, and--

"Okay, seriously . . ."

"Right then . . ."

Xander rolled on top of Spike, murmuring nonsense into the kiss they launched even as Spike grasped his hips, repositioning him so they were cock to cock. He twisted helpfully underneath him, thrusting against Xander while Xander gripped his shoulders and bit and licked into the kiss.

"God this feels so good, feels so --"

"Feels right, yeah, so right, pet --"

"Not just that, it's like I need --"

"Yeah, like that love, fuck . . . need you too, want you --"

"Can you . . . again, inside me . . ."

"Think I could see my way to it, pet . . . oh hell. Have to be inside you, right now . . ."

Xander flushed all over as he lifted, rearranging his limbs until he was straddling Spike. "This okay?"

Spike peered up through heavy lids as Xander's slightly shaky hand reached behind to guide his cock flush to the cleft. "That's it, lovely. Nice and slow this time, I promise."

Xander stopped for a moment, his eyes screwed shut and made one last ditch effort. "This isn't like us!" he got out.

"Then we're idiots," Spike said firmly.

Xander opened his eyes and they gazed at one another for a moment. "We must be," Xander said in a soft voice.

"Right then." Spike gave a small nod, his hands stroking up Xander's torso soothingly.

This time there was no talking as Xander's hand found Spike's hard cock, as Spike's eyes rolled back momentarily when he felt his head breach Xander, enveloped at last in that enticing heat. There was no speaking as Xander moved back slowly, easing Spike's erection into that already slick hole, crying out softly as Spike murmured to him and pressed into him inch by inch. There were no words as Spike traced a finger along the prominent vein on Xander's hardened cock, ran it along the rim and over the damp head before bringing his finger to his mouth and licking it clean.

Spike's eyes met Xander's in the moment that he was fully seated inside him, and they smiled at one another slightly.

"How do I . . ." Xander asked.

"Like this," Spike said, guiding Xander so that he lifted up and down. "Oh yeah. Keep on exactly like that, pet. You set the pace, alright?"

"You might have to help some," Xander said with a crooked grin. "Little hard to concentrate . . . because . . . oh god . . . why haven't we done this before?"

"Too busy harping at each other," Spike got out between pants. He gritted his teeth to stay on track, grabbed Xander's hips, and changed the angle slightly with each shove inside until he heard Xander yelp.

"Yeah, I . . . oh god . . . Spike . . . again . . ."

"Just like that . . . baby, love the way you . . . tight, oh fuck, so tight . . ."

Xander managed to look desperate and peevish all at once. "Want to go slow, but can't . . . please, Spike, help me . . . faster . . ."

Spike nearly laughed out loud. "Don't have to ask me twice, baby. Lovely like that, you are, pretty cock twitching at me . . ."

One hand under Xander, the other giving too-soft caresses to his erection down to his balls and back again, Spike began lifting and thrusting in tandem, pushing hard into Xander, watching those eyes get wider and hazier with every pulse.

They grunted at each other, gasping when a tightness in each of them buzzed along their nerves and somehow met in the middle between them. Spike's grip on Xander's cock pulled it taut again and again, and Xander pushed up and sank down relentlessly until they were shouting together hoarsely, coming so hard and so close that it wasn't clear who'd stopped and who'd started.

Xander struggled to even his breathing, but finally gave in, slumping onto Spike and letting the hitching breaths come out of him. Spike made noises, more like cooing than words, rearranging and settling them until Xander was in his arms, still panting, while Spike rubbed circles along his shoulders and back.

"Wow. And at the risk of repeating myself, wow," Xander said reverently. Spike just laughed.

They lay tangled for a long while, comfortably tracing patterns on skin and squirming closer together.

"Tired?" Spike asked after some time had elapsed, seeing Xander's eyelids droop.

"Kinda, but . . ." Xander looked up at him sheepishly.

Spike looked at him, amazed, then laughed again, a happy astonished laugh. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Xander said, all embarrassment with flushing cheeks and downcast eyes. "Can we . . . again?"

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 4 by EntreNous

Xander's hand emerged from the covers and groped around on the stack of milk crates serving as a nightstand. Ringing -- alarm? -- no, phone -- and the receiver was snatched and brought under the pile of blankets.

"Xander. Thanks."

Not that Xander didn't welcome Angel's customary not-overly talkative self, because he could still feel himself struggling into waking status. But . . . thanks? Not so much like Angel. And for what?

"I'll give a hearty 'you're welcome' as soon as I know what the heck you're talking about," Xander grumbled into the phone. "What's the big idea, anyway, calling me so early? You're not supposed to be up in the morning. And did I miss the memo about you suddenly getting on board the whole human courtesy thing?"

"For the box, Xander. I'm awake because it's nightfall." Angel paused, and then remarked petulantly, "I say things like please and thank you all the time."

Xander shifted, bringing the covers down and yawning into the phone. "Not to me you don't."

"Well, this was important enough for me to thank you. Key, in fact, to negotiating a truce between the two warring Glaz'broth clans just outside of Sunnydale. So I just wanted to let you and Spike know --"

"Spike!" Xander shrieked, and the lump of covers next to him jerked and began cursing.

"GottagoAngelbye!" he blurted into the phone and hung up.

"Wazzat?" Spike said in a cranky voice.

"Spike!" Xander exclaimed once again.

Spike rubbed his temples and gave a world-weary sigh. "Got that part down already. Me Spike. You Xander. We . . ." He left his sentence unfinished and pointed a finger at Xander. "Hey! You had sex with me!"

"No, I didn't," Xander protested. "You had sex with *me*!"

They glared at one another angrily.

"Fine. I may have had sex with you," Spike said grudgingly.

Xander huffed indignantly, but then nodded. "Well, guess it's fair to say we both were involved. But this is *so* much more your fault than mine!"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Can't admit to your own part. Typical. Who kept saying we should go

again, now?"

"I resent that! Who was the one that was all, 'oh, need you, want you', and enticing me with the stomach stroking and thrusting?"

"Oh yeah? Well, who was the one that climbed aboard like a naughty boy and rode me like he couldn't get enough of--"

They moved desperately towards one another, breathing hard and bent on connecting their still-naked bodies, until Xander forcibly wrenched himself away.

"What the fuck?" he swore as he scrambled to his feet and backed away until he hit the wall.

"Oh, calm yourself," Spike snarled, but he looked worried as he began to scan the room for his clothes. "Can't go anywhere yet with the sun up, so we might as well try to make nice and get past this."

"Except not, because it's dark outside," Xander pointed out in a superior tone. "So you can just go ahead and leave any time you want."

"Like a casino in here, it is," Spike said. "How am I supposed to know?"

"What, like you thought after we spent all night doing it that we wouldn't sleep through the next day?" Xander asked hysterically.

"Truthfully, don't think I thought much about it, or wouldn't have done all this in the first place, would I?" Spike had gotten his jeans on, but when Xander met his eyes after pulling on a pair of cargo pants he dropped his t-shirt, plastered himself against the opposite wall and regarded Xander with a Must! Resist! face.

Xander pushed against his own wall and shook his head. "We don't have time for this. There's a meeting tonight, and it'll look weird if we don't show."

"It's odd if *you* don't show," Spike corrected him. "I've done my good deed for the week with that sodding box delivery, and until someone offers up more compensation to do more errand work for you lot, I'm my own vamp."

"Okay, fine." Xander said. He brought his hands up to rub at his face. "Just . . . can you not . . . that is, . . ."

"Don't worry," Spike muttered. "Won't tell anyone about your dirty deeds."

"Uh . . . thanks," Xander said after an awkward pause.

Spike gave him a dismissive wave and headed for the door.

"Wait . . . Spike?" Xander called, his voice trembling.

Spike turned back and looked at him intently, waiting. "Yeah."

"I . . . just . . . you . . . Angel said thanks," Xander finished weakly.

With a snort, Spike made for the exit once more.

* * *

"Perhaps we ought to run through the recent developments to start with," Giles said.

" 'Kay. Glaz'broth clans?" Willow asked.

"Check," Buffy replied absently. "Angel said he had the solution, and since it doesn't involve slayage, I'm more concerned about the new nest of vamps on the south side."

"Vampires," Xander put in. "You can't trust them further than you can throw them. Oh, sure, they say they had a bloody good time, and then they just take off like . . ." He trailed off as he realized that everyone was regarding him curiously. "Stake 'em all," he finished, and Buffy shrugged.

"Glad we have your go-ahead. You want to come along on this dusting expedition?"

"Sure, yeah," Xander said hastily. "Will?"

"Can't," Willow said. "I have to finish packing for the Wiccan Unification Summer Session. Three more days before two months of magic and fun in the sun!"

"Still trying to get my head around a Willow-less summer," Buffy said with a small smile.

"Definitely go ahead home and get ready so that we can have a great time at your send-off tomorrow night."

"By all means, take care of your preparations," Giles agreed. "Though I find myself wishing the departure date were further off so we could keep you with us, at least we can look forward to your return all the sooner."

"You know I'll write and call and send you eerie astral projections of me frolicking by the pool," Willow said cheerfully. "Plus Oz'll bring back full reports when he visits every couple of weeks. So no need for the sad."

"Yeah, well, I'm not big on the idea," Xander said. "Especially now."

Buffy and Giles exchanged glances as Willow turned to Xander. "Wait. You're not? What's the what with now?" Willow asked.

Xander threw up his hands. "I . . . now . . . nothing. But isn't there a later session or something? Sure, you want to get your magic on, but did you ever think about *our* needs?"

"Xander," Buffy said softly. "We've been through this. Willow needs to connect to the coven-thing, and we all get the benefit of her skill-improvement.

Plus the summer's always a slow time. Better she take care of this now than have to take a semester off school and leave us high and dry during heavy-traffic evil season."

"I should think you'd be happy for Willow and the good she'll accomplish as a result of this experience," Giles commented.

"This isn't just about protecting the people and the volume of distress signals and blah-dee blah," Xander said in frustration. "What about me? I haven't had to cope with a no-Willow situation in forever. I have needs, important Willow-specific needs. Don't tell me that doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things."

"But Xander, you're the one who said it was a good idea after we talked it through. You were all, 'And high time, too,' and 'do some spells for me!' when we spoke about it last. You were the one who said I shouldn't worry about abandoning Oz for a few months while I did this. And, you even said 'Don't worry about me . . . you're due for some quality non-Hellmouth time.' I mean, did

something change?" Willow's brow wrinkled in confusion.

"Damn your near-perfect recall," Xander said finally. "No . . . nothing's changed . . . much. You're right, Willow. Sorry."

"That's okay," Willow said. She nodded, but her eyes studied Xander's face as though she was searching for some hint to his unexpected outburst. "*You* okay?"

"Sure," Xander said. He shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. "Just feel . . . I don't know, like I'm coming down with the flu."

"Well, we can't have you getting sick when there are important bon voyage parties in the works," Buffy said. "Why don't you skip patrol and I'll see if Angel is lurking around?"

"Yeah, okay," Xander said.

"You want me to mix you up some medicinal herbs?" Willow asked. "Where are you sore?"

Xander opened and shut his mouth several times. "Uh . . . nowhere special. Kind of all over. And nah, I don't want to eat a bunch of dried grass. Probably just could use some sleep. I'll, uh, catch you all tomorrow night at the Bronze." He gave them all a half-wave, and left quickly.

"Okay, did anyone else think that was weird?" Buffy asked.

Giles frowned. "It did seem somewhat . . . I wonder . . . Has anything occurred recently that would have precipitated Xander's change of heart?"

"Not that I can think of," Willow said. "But I have been kind of preoccupied with leaving town."

"Haven't noticed anything myself," Buffy added. "Maybe we'll get more of a clue tomorrow night. Or maybe he's just grumpy with flu, and he'll be our sunshiny Xander again at the party."

"Well, then," Giles said. "I suppose we'll just have to wait and see."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 5 by EntreNous

Xander congratulated himself when he got home that night, since he'd made it there without stopping by Spike's crypt.

It had been some convincing to get his feet to go the right way, and he'd actually had to turn around when he found himself at the cemetery gates, but he'd made it. Home free, Spike free. He tried to ignore the pang in his chest when he entered the empty apartment.

When he got up the next morning after a night of tossing and turning, and watched an infomercial about the *Quik Time Salad Shooter!*™ instead of calling Spike on the vampire's recently-acquired cellphone, he celebrated by eating two pieces of chocolate cake for breakfast.

He cursed the chocolate cake and his apparently continuing-flu soon after, however, when he spent the next hour throwing it up.

Afterwards, he actually took a bath instead of a shower, though that meant he had to scrub the tub first. He wasn't big on cleaning generally, rationalizing that if the soap got him unsmelly and presentable that it couldn't hurt the shower much. Of course, needing to fill the bathtub meant confronting the ookyness of the tiles.

Bath finally drawn and taken, Xander perched on the edge of the tub and sweated a little in the humid bathroom. It had helped a little with the overall soreness, though not so much with the

sore-in-new-places from his all night bout of first time man-sex with Spike.

Of course, thinking of that novel soreness made him think of Spike some more, and for reasons unknown to Xander that led to him holding the phone receiver in one hand with the other hovering over the keypad. So to combat that he dragged his worn-out, nauseous self to bed, where he was finally able to catch some shut-eye.

Of course what he'd meant to be a short nap turned into waking up with only an hour to go before Willow's bon voyage party at the Bronze. The time shortage shouldn't have been an issue. He knew there'd be food at the club, so eating dinner wasn't a problem (though the thought of any kind of edible stuff made him feel more queasy). The idea that choosing what he'd wear would present a problem was laughable, since he didn't much care what he had on his back as long as comfort abounded. But for some reason when he went to get out cargo pants and a t-shirt, his limited clothing selection made him feel. . . sad. After sniffing on the bed for a good half hour, and asking himself when the hell he'd become such a big sissy girl, he finally pulled himself together enough to make it out the door.

* * *

Xander pushed his way into the crowd, searching for his friends. The noise and tumult around him made his head swim a bit, but he figured as soon as he sat down he'd be okay. The problem was trying to find everyone and sit down near *them* before he slumped into some random sofa. Hell, never mind the sofa -- even the floor was starting to look pretty comfy right about now.

A good thing among other good things about Willow was that she was easy to zero in on even in the Bronze when a good band brought out wall-to-wall people -- just look for the cute, often flippy, red hair. Sure, someone else might guess Oz's hair would be the standout mark, but Xander knew that a placing a bet on a single color for Oz's spiky locks was a losing scenario.

"You made it!" Willow exclaimed with evident relief when he got close enough. "I thought you weren't going to, but Oz said you would come for sure, and Buffy thought . . . oh my goodness, Xander!" Her happy expression rapidly shifted to one of concern as Xander swayed on his feet.

"What's wrong?" Buffy asked loudly as she rushed over to help. Together they pulled him over to an available couch.

"It's no problem, guys, seriously. Just the flu, or whatever," Xander said. He sat back against the cushions and tried not to think about the way Buffy's face was blurring in front of him or how Willow's nervous hand clutching his arm was starting to feel like a faint touch.

But just then the noise of the dance music and the shouts and murmurs of everyone around him faded to silence. He did, however, hear Oz say quietly, "There he goes," just before he blacked out.

* * *

When he came to, he was lying on the Summers' living room couch with everyone hovering around him.

"Okay, Xander, you need to tell me what's happened to you in the last forty-eight hours," Buffy was saying firmly.

"What the what now?" Xander asked. "It's . . . I . . . why . . . Buffy, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Buffy thinks this might be something, um, supernatural," Willow said from her perch on the chair

beside the couch. She patted Xander's hand reassuringly, but her eyes were troubled.

"Forty eight hours ago was around the last time that any of us really talked to you. Or at least, talked to you before you got all weird, like you were last night" Buffy explained. "If something did happen, I'm guessing that it went down in that time frame."

"I did not get all weird," Xander said hotly. But the combination of no food and the return of the earlier nausea wasn't really helping him sound righteously indignant. Plus, he suddenly had a hard time following the conversation, getting only snippets of the words spoken around him.

"You seemed upset last night, Xander, not like you--"

"Didn't you say Giles was the one who talked to--"

"Maybe Angel knows what to--"

"Might just really be sick--"

"That's it," Xander said, grasping on to one of the comments that he heard in the mix. "I'm just really sick. Nothing odd or out of the ordinary. And no supernatural whoosis for me. All kinds of normal here."

"Xander," Buffy said quietly, kneeling down so he could meet her gaze.

"Yeah," he managed.

"When was the last time you were sick? Cold, flu, stomach upset, anything?"

"Um . . ." Xander tried to think.

"Xander doesn't *get* sick," Willow put in.

"He does have a strong constitution," Oz said.

"Right," Buffy said seriously. "So I'm putting money on the something odd or out of the ordinary, okay? Even if you don't think so, Xander, I say it can't hurt to check."

"When is Giles getting here?" Oz asked.

"Soon," Buffy said. "When we called he said he'd see if he could scrounge up anything to take the edge off whatever this is and then head over. Plus I'm hoping that he'll know where to start looking for triggering events or demon thingies. Since he saw Xander two nights ago, before whatever this was started, maybe he can tell--"

"Spike," Xander said weakly.

"Spike?" Willow asked. She raised her voice a little. "Spike's not here, Xander. It's just us, see?"

"Spike was the one," Xander began, then pulled up short. However sick he felt, there was no way he was letting loose with the details of what exactly Spike had been the one to do.

"Think he means he *saw* Spike two nights ago," Oz suggested.

"Oh yeah," Buffy said slowly. "Angel said something about the two of them . . . and a delivery?"

Willow nodded, and stood up. "I'm calling Spike too. Maybe he can help us figure out what

happened to Xander, or at least where to start asking questions."

And before Xander could make a protest, Spike was summoned, and Xander was given crushed ice to suck on.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 6 by EntreNous

From Part Five:

"Spike was the one," Xander began, then pulled up short. However sick he felt, there was no way he was letting loose with the details of what exactly Spike had been the one to do.

"Think he means he **saw** Spike two nights ago," Oz suggested.

"Oh yeah," Buffy said slowly. "Angel said something about the two of them . . . and a delivery?"

Willow nodded, and stood up. "I'm calling Spike too. Maybe he can help us figure out what happened to Xander, or at least where to start asking questions."

And before Xander could make a protest, Spike was summoned, and Xander was given crushed ice to suck on. *****

Xander sighed when he felt a cool hand against his face. Though he wasn't feverish, he did feel uncomfortable and hot, and he turned his head into the contact, murmuring grumble-y noises as he tried to shift further into the comforting touch.

"There, now," a very distinctive low-pitched English voice said, and Xander sat up all at once.

"Hey!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"What is it now?" Spike asked. Now that Xander had moved, he sat on his heels on the floor next to the sofa, hands on his thighs and looked extremely put out. "You seemed to like that well enough for the last ten minutes or so."

"I don't care what it seemed like I liked. You'd better keep your hands to yourself," Xander said in a furious tone. "I think I caught some kind of flu from you, and . . ."

"Spike can't very well give you the flu, seeing as he's --"

"Oh great -- you got here when?" Xander said to Giles. He shielded his eyes from the lamp shining in them to look up into Giles' concerned face. "And fine, I know he's dead. I'm not a moron. But maybe he gave me the flu anyway.

You know, just to screw around with me. Like germ warfare?"

Giles gazed at Spike doubtfully. "Well, I suppose it's not beyond the realm of --"

"Oh, bloody hell," Spike said. "If I actually knew how to start unleashing disease and mayhem, don't you think I'd begin with the wankers at the lab who decided to have a bit of fun with inserting small pieces of silicone in my brain? Didn't give him anything . . . anything **bad**, that is."

At that Giles moved closer and sat on the easy chair next to the couch. "Now, when you say nothing **bad**, do you mean that you did in fact give --"

"Hey now, where is everyone else?" Xander broke in.

Giles shifted his attention back to Xander. "Oh! Well, Willow has gone to fetch some ingredients that should at the very least lessen the effects of whatever it is that is making you ill. Of course, until we determine the exact cause of this malady, we won't be able to cure you."

Xander slumped back further against the couch. "And Buffy? Oz?"

"Have gone to speak to Angel," Giles said gently. "If there's anything unusual occurring, he may have some information that could be of help to us."

"So you think it's something to do with hocus pocus," Spike said.

"Hard to say at this point, but yes, that's a distinct possibility."

Spike nodded impatiently. "That doesn't exactly narrow it down, though, does it? Anything nasty could have caused it. I don't know where you'd even --"

"Yeah, like you wouldn't *know* about nasty, comma, doing the," Xander muttered.

Spike shut his mouth grimly while Giles looked between the two of them with keen curiosity.

Willow rushed into the room with her arms full of packages. "Okay! I got a bunch of different stuff so we'd have options. But first I want to start out with a kind of assessing spell -- maybe I can get a handle on what angle we should begin with for treating whatever it is that Xander's got. It's a little . . . well, I've got to poke at you a bit, Xander. But it won't hurt, and all you have to do is take off your shirt so I can try to get a read using different areas of your skin. It's just for the preparation part. When I do the spell, you can lie there as bundled up as you please."

"Fine, go ahead," Xander said. He shucked his t-shirt. When even that made him a little dizzy, he lay back down hastily.

"I'll just go make some tea," Giles announced, stepping into the kitchen to allow them some privacy.

But Spike lingered in the room. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

Willow never took her eyes off the spell book as she flipped through looking for the right page. "Of course I know--"

"Yeah, you think so, but how can you be sure the little tricks and puffs of smoke you're playing with won't hurt him?" He shifted uneasily in the doorway, watching Xander even as Xander mustered up the energy to roll his eyes at Spike.

"Spike," Willow said patiently. "The assessing spell can't hurt him at all. And I don't know what step we'll be taking next, so--"

"Oh, that's reassuring," Xander said in a faint voice.

"That's it," Spike said decisively. "I won't have you messing with him when you might--"

"Giiiiiiiles!" Willow cried out.

Giles rushed to the doorway, almost crashing into Spike. "Yes? What is it? Have you found out--"

"Make Spike go away," Willow said petulantly. "I'm trying to figure out what's up, and he just keeps--"

"Oh, fine," Giles sighed. "Spike, come into the kitchen. Perhaps you can shed some light on what may have caused this sudden outbreak, or lead us to its source."

"Yeah, alright," Spike said, suddenly subdued. He cast one look back at Xander, who was watching him with widened eyes.

"Now, don't you worry," Willow said briskly. "We'll get to the bottom of this in no time."

After tapping at his chest with some swabs and gesturing that he should put his t-shirt back on, Willow knelt in front of the coffee table and set to work. For a moment there was only the soft murmur of Giles and Spike speaking in the kitchen while Willow separated out her ingredients and mixed together the concoction, glancing at the directions from time to time. Xander watched her forlornly as he thought about her leaving for Wicca training camp after just two more days. She'd be gone for weeks. And he hadn't even gotten a chance to--

"Willow?" Xander asked quietly.

"Yeah?" she asked, tapping out a measure of roots into a mortar and preparing to grind them.

"Would this -- whatever the sick thing is -- possibly have anything to do with . . . um, me having sex with someone recently?"

Willow dropped the pestle and goggled at Xander. "Uh. Well. Oh."

"I was going to tell you," Xander hissed in a lowered voice. "But then you were going away, and you were all stressed out about packing -- I thought it could wait. But now with the onset of the possibly-magical symptoms, it seemed like it could be important for you to know that I slept with someone the other night."

Willow's brow furrowed, and then her face cleared as she nodded vigorously. "Oh! Well, uh, yay! For the sex-having, because it's good that you're -- but oh, bad, because maybe somehow you picked up something ooky? But no, that couldn't be it -- well it could, but not this soon. And did I mention yay, and how **fine** I am with this?"

"I don't -- well, it can't be the regular sex problem stuff," Xander continued in a whisper. "Because the person couldn't have given me anything like STDs or stuff, and they --"

Willow cleared her throat and shuffled over on her knees so that she was closer to the couch. "Xander, that isn't good. You shouldn't believe a girl, even if she's really nice, when she says that -- you should always practice safe sex. You know, we're having a presentation all about it on our floor next week. Maybe you should come! They give out free condoms and, uh, dental dams."

Xander gaped at her. "Okay, I'm not going to ask about the dental dams, but trust me, there's no way that the person could have passed anything along. It'd be impossible for them."

Willow looked ready to object all over again, but then she switched tracks. "Fine. There's no way you could have contracted something -- so why even bring it up? You were the one that asked if it could have had to do with you sleeping with--"

"Because the person that I slept with . . . well, they might be semi-evil."

Nodding slowly, Willow tried again. "Okay. Disease-free. But potentially nefarious."

"Exactly," Xander said, relieved.

"Xander?"

"What?"

"Why are we playing the pronoun game?"

"The what?" Xander asked hesitantly.

Willow gave him a pointed look. "You slept with 'someone'. 'They' couldn't have given you an STD. 'The person' could be up to no good."

"Oh yeah," Xander said. "Well, the thing of it is . . ."

Willow leaned in and her standard-level whisper dropped even lower in volume. "Did you have sex with a guy? Because yeah, that's a new thing . . . but you can . . . and should! . . . choose who you want to . . . oh boy . . . I mean, that would be so not be a problem, okay?" Willow moved even closer and flung her arms around Xander. "I love you no matter who you have sex with," she said in a sniffling voice. She backed away, still on her knees and swiped at her eyes. "But I'm still worried no matter who it is too. You know guys can contract things from each other, so the same-sex thing doesn't mean that you shouldn't use protect--"

"It wasn't just a guy," Xander exclaimed loudly in sudden frustration. "I slept with *Spike*. And yeah, he can't give me any sex diseases because he's *dead*. But he's only recently-chipped, and still pretty much evil at heart, so

I think he might have done something else to me. And that's what's probably making me feel nauseous and dizzy and like I want to cry all the time, and did I mention that I hurt *everywhere*? So if you're trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with me, I strongly recommend asking Spike what kind of stuff he slipped me to a) have sex with him and b) make me completely sick!"

The sound of teacups dropping and shattering rang out from the kitchen.

"Whew, it's crazy out there," Buffy announced as she came into the room. Her cheeks were pink with cold, and she shivered a bit in the warmth of the house. "The Glaz'broth clans are ready to throw down, and Angel was in serious behind-closed-door talks with two of the representatives. I tried to get in to speak with him, but no go. Oz is waiting there just in case there's a break in the talks. And if he can't find out anything tonight, I promise that tomorrow I'll definitely figure out if Angel knows anything about Xander's forty-eight-hour demonic bug. And hey, what with Willow's magicky know-how, maybe we won't even need Angel's help."

She tossed her jacket onto a chair and rested her hands on her hips. "You know, with this Glaz'broth clan conflict . . . I'm not sure why the solution Angel came up with didn't work. He still won't tell me what it was exactly. But this does not bode well for fun and games and nights off for good little Slayers. Even the vamps are freaking out -- they can tell *something* is majorly wrong. Good, 'cause that makes them easier to kill; bad, 'cause it also makes 'em flee out of their hidey-holes and come at me all at once."

She stopped speaking as she took in Xander, red-faced and upset on the couch, and Willow, kneeling on the floor with her mouth slack-jawed in shock. "Um. Did I miss something?"

"Xander slept with Spike!" Willow blurted out.

"When? While I was gone?" Buffy asked in confusion. "Is he feverish and delusional? I didn't think he had enough strength to stand up, never mind--"

"No, no -- had sex with him two nights ago, pre-magical-flu," Xander muttered. He'd contemplated denying his earlier admission as the ramblings of his feverish brain, but since he was about to conk himself in the head to stop the aching and dizziness, he figured he might as well come clean beforehand.

"More like *all* night, two nights ago," Spike corrected as he returned to the room. He glanced at Xander as though he was trying to make up his mind if he should go over to him.

"Haven't you done enough?" Xander shot out. Still, he didn't shy away when Spike moved close to the sofa and loomed over Willow as though he was overseeing the proceedings.

"Yes, well," Giles said. He ignored Spike's protective stance over Xander, waved off Buffy's questioning sounds, and directed his attention to Willow. "Whatever the case with Spike and Xander's encounter the other night and our concerns about their . . . well . . . it remains that Xander is quite ill. We must focus our attention on discovering what we can do to ease his suffering."

Willow shut her mouth and gave a small nod. "I got skin samples from Xander already and mashed up the ingredients. Can you read the incantation while I burn the mixture?"

Giles sat on a chair near Willow, took the spell book from her, and spoke the words quietly while she moved the preparations to a small bowl and set them afire. Xander felt drowsy suddenly as he watched the small glow and listened to Giles drone on. The text was probably demonic, Xander thought. Either that, or Giles had suddenly put a bunch of marbles in his mouth.

Nothing major happened. No large flash of smoke, or room-illumination, or even a bad smell. What did happen, though, was that Willow went a little pale and clutched Giles' arm. The two of them exchanged a look.

"Well, are you going to tell us what's wrong with the boy?" Spike said after several moments had passed.

"Will?" Xander asked.

"Just a minute," Willow said. "Giles, can you--?"

"Yes, why don't we--" Giles responded, and the two of them fled into the kitchen.

Xander moved on the couch uncomfortably. When Spike's hand came to rest on his shoulder, he grimaced a bit, but unknowingly leaned towards the contact.

"Hey! Guys? That is so not fair!" Buffy called after Giles and Willow. "We don't keep magical secrets in this house! We're supposed to all find out everything at the same time. Right? *Right*? Guys?"

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 7 by EntreNous

Buffy frowned and turned back to Spike and Xander. "Don't you think that was kind of rude of them to --"

She stopped short when she saw Spike press his lips against Xander's forehead and stroke his tousled hair. An exclamation was on the tip of her tongue, but when Xander sighed and moved a bit closer to Spike, she merely made a choking sound.

"What's the matter?" Xander asked curiously. Spike's fingers were running through his hair, and Xander had his head tilted into the massaging touch.

"Oh, well, uh . . . nothing?" Buffy replied in a strained voice.

Spike dropped a kiss on Xander's head and stood. "Can't wait for tomorrow to find out what Angel knows -- if he can help, I want him to help now. Look after Xander, would you?"

"Look after Xander," Buffy repeated disbelievingly. "Those words seem like English, but . . ." She stopped herself from saying that it made no sense for *Spike* to tell her something like that when she saw Xander frown to himself and touch his head where Spike had kissed him.

"Good luck even getting in to that meeting," she said instead. She moved over to the couch and rested her hand on Xander's shoulder. "And Xander will be fine here with us," she added.

Spike shot her an annoyed look. "Yeah, sure Xander'll be fine here with you all -- tell me again the part about how you've cleverly figured out what's wrong with him."

"Hey!" Buffy exclaimed. "I've been out there--"

"Finding out nothing," Spike finished. "And the reason you couldn't get into Angel's little pow-wow is you'd make the demons all skittish. How's Angel supposed to broker a truce if the two sides are wondering what kind of trouble you're going to stir up?"

"Makes sense," Xander said half-grudgingly, half-admiringly. When Buffy looked askance at him, he mouthed "What?" at her.

"Fine," Buffy said as she turned back to Spike. "Go. See if you can get some answers. Just . . . go."

With a snort in Buffy's direction, and a small nod in Xander's, Spike left.

"Maybe I should check on Will and Giles," Buffy said, starting to move toward the kitchen.

"Buff, they'll come back when they've figured stuff out," Xander said. He paused and glanced at Buffy's tightened jaw. "Don't wig."

"I'm just trying to figure out what's up so I can fix it," Buffy said slowly and deliberately. "I'm *not* wiggling."

"But you are," Xander said quietly. "You're freaked out that I slept with Spike. And you want to ask questions but you don't know if you should. It's making you jumpy, and that's making me feel ookier."

Buffy sat on the edge of the coffee table, and decided to take the part of Xander's words she could deal with. "It's not just me that's making you feel ooky, Xander."

"I know, I know; demonic influenza," Xander said. He pulled himself up a bit, and made a face when he had to lean back again.

She rested her hands on her knees and peered at him. "Yeah, demonic influenza."

A few moments passed while Xander turned on the couch and sighed and Buffy watched him with a keen eye.

"Hey, Xander? . . . And don't take this the wrong way . . . but you know, you looked a little better when I came in a few minutes ago. Up until when Spike left, you had some color. And your eyes didn't look so glaze-y. But now . . ."

Xander's hands flew to his face as if he could figure out how he looked by tapping his fingers against his cheeks. "Damn. I did feel kind of okay for a little while . . . and now I feel like I'm going to hurl again." On cue, he clutched his stomach.

"Want a bucket or something?" Buffy asked, scooting over on the table warily.

"Nah," Xander said miserably. "Don't think I have anything else left in me."

"Wish they'd come back in and tell us what's up," Buffy said, nodding her head towards the kitchen.

"You and me both."

She reached out and clutched his hand impulsively. Xander managed to give her a watery smile in return.

"We think we may have established a few things," Giles announced as he came back into the living room. "At least, we have ideas about what sort of tests we'll need to run now."

"Tests?" Buffy asked in confusion. "I thought this was spell-detective-material."

"Uh, see that's just it," Willow said in a rush. She stood beside Giles and twisted her hands nervously. "We think a spell might have been at the root of this . . . but what's happening now is a natural effect . . . well, not *typically* natural in this kind of situation . . . But it looks like this is more of a job for plain old reading of chemical reactions."

Xander exchanged a nervous look with Buffy. "Is that good news or bad news?" he asked.

Willow seemed about to answer, but Giles spoke first. "I think it best that we wait until after we've investigated some possibilities to answer more of your questions."

"Put that I'm now officially terrified at the top of your list of symptoms," Xander muttered.

At this Buffy squeezed Xander's hand so tightly that Xander gave a high-pitched yelp.

"Oh! Sorry, Xander, sorry!"

"That's okay," Xander gasped. He slumped back against the pile of pillows and took a deep breath. One of his hands went to rest on his stomach while the other lifted to massage his temples.

"Okay -- look at that. Xander's gotten much worse now that Spike's been gone for a while," Buffy said suddenly. "I was saying it before, and he's even paler now. When Spike was in the house, Xander was starting to look okay. But now . . . how come, do you think?"

Willow coughed so hard that Giles had to whap her on her back. He almost imperceptibly shook his head at her, and she answered in an overly-lighthearted tone. "Well . . . that could mean anything and nothing, so I don't think you should worry too much about--"

"What did he do to me?" Xander interrupted. His face paled and he grabbed at his blanket in apprehension. "Is this Spike's fault after all?"

Giles' lips twisted slightly. "I'd say that's what we're about to discover."

"Oh, Xander," Willow said feelingly.

"Oh, Xander what?" Xander asked. He was having trouble catching his breath, and his gaze flew to rest on each of them in turn before his eyes decided to roll back into his head.

"There he goes again," he heard Buffy say distantly, and he watched his eyelids as his vision greyed and then went dark.

* * *

"What's up with me waking up in a different location every time I come to?" Xander complained when he realized he was now ensconced on the couch at Giles' place.

"You seemed awake enough earlier when you kicked me in the chest as I tried to right you," Giles grumbled from the side chair.

"I told you that Xander sleep-kicks," Willow said gently as she sat on the end of the couch and patted Xander's feet.

"Yes, well, now I know about that idiosyncrasy first-hand," Giles said with a mock bow from his seat. He turned his head to Xander once more. "We're here because we needed access to certain materials in my apartment to run the tests."

Xander sat up a bit and put out a hand to steady himself. "Hello again to the dizziness. Any idea about which test we're going to try first?"

"We kind of did one while you were asleep," Willow said in a rush. "It just required a simple follicle sample to--"

"Hey!" Xander protested when he felt the almost-bare patch of hair at the base of his scalp. He looked at each of them accusingly.

"Oh, you can hardly see that," Giles said impatiently.

"Maybe *I* can't see the back of my own head, but anyone else who bothers to look . . . Hey, where's Spike?" Xander asked suddenly.

Willow very deliberately did *not* look at Giles. "He left while we were at Buffy's, remember? And then he stayed at Angel's what with the sun being up. But I thought that, uh, you might want to see . . . or at least you might *feel* better if . . . well, anyway, Oz is giving him a ride back over here soon. Giles wants to tell everyone what the deal is once we've ruled out any chance of error."

"Unlikely that there has been any error," Giles said quietly, and Willow raised her voice with increased enthusiasm.

"Yup, so he'll be around soon, and Buffy is talking with Angel finally, and Oz'll be back too. We'll all be here for you. Everybody except Angel, that is, because he said he had to get something else for that clan negotiation brouhaha."

Xander waved his hand impatiently at her. "Okay, normally I'd ask how the Glaz'broth clan thingy is going, but I've got to admit, Will, you're distracting me out with the 'everyone will soon arrive and gather around to watch Xander die' talk."

"No one is dying," Giles said firmly.

"Then what's *happening*?" Xander asked. "If I'm not dead, and what's going on is all natural like Willow said before, how come you can't just tell me?"

"Xander, remember how you always talked about how you wanted to have kids?" Willow asked quickly.

"Uh, no," Xander answered. "I've never talked about that in my life. I think you've confused me with another Xander who likes to plan for his future. Besides, what does that have to do with

anything?"

"How do you feel about raising children?" Giles inquired. "Do you have any objection to being around them? And what about--"

"I don't know," Xander said in confusion. "Is this some kind of weird test to figure out if something has messed with my procreative urges?"

"Oh, your procreative urges seem to be functioning perfectly," Giles reassured him. He cleared his throat nervously when Willow signaled that he should stop speaking.

"Oooooookaaaaay," Xander said with wide eyes. "Uh, Willow? Want to tell me what's up?"

Willow pressed her palms together and began. "Xander . . . I never thought I'd be saying this -- not that it's bad! It's unusual, that's for sure. Remember, though, just because something is different doesn't mean that it's wrong, even if it's not what we usually think of when . . . But I think you'll do really well, and everyone will help out, so it won't even be a question of how it'll work. It's kind of amazing, really, and you're like a trailblazer, a genuine pioneer, and years from now, people will--"

Xander held up one hand. "Willow. Stop. What is it?"

Willow took a deep breath. "Congratulations, Xander. You're pregnant."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 8 by EntreNous

Xander stared at Willow blankly for a few moments. Then he shook his head, knocked his palm against his right ear a few times, and said, "This is insane, but I swear, I thought I just heard you say I was pregnant."

"What Willow said is the truth, Xander. You seem to have . . . conceived." Giles rubbed at his forehead with his hand.

"Conceived?" Xander repeated, his voice breaking. He drew in a sharp breath, and abruptly erupted into a coughing fit. After nearly a full minute had passed, Willow gestured at Giles frantically until he went to get Xander a glass of water.

Xander took a few sips from the proffered glass and nodded at them to signal he was okay. But when Giles cleared his throat and began "Now, about your pregnancy," Xander choked and let the glass slip from his hand. The shattering sound as it broke against the floor made them all jump.

Xander laughed a little. "Giles. Willow. I know that things have been dull around here lately, but you two, not so good with the practical jokes, okay? I'll be alright, seriously. Sure, I'm worried about whatever this is, but you don't have to try to cook up something wacky like this to distract me."

Giles frowned and Xander shrugged, frustration evident in his voice. "I mean, if you don't know what's wrong with me, just say so."

"The fact of it is, Xander, we most assuredly *do* know what's --"

Willow interrupted Giles hastily. "Xander, I know it sounds hard to believe, but you really are pregnant. And the sooner you can bring yourself to face up to it--"

"Listen," Xander said firmly. "I'm not . . . I *can't* be . . . you both remember that I'm a guy, right?"

"Xander --"

"No!" Xander said loudly. "You're acting like crazy people. You think it sounds hard to believe? Try impossible."

"What's going on?" Spike asked as he rushed into the room. "You lot find out what's ailing him yet?"

Oz followed inside at a more leisurely pace and raised his eyebrows as Spike sat on the couch at Xander's side and touched his hand to Xander's cheek.

"Spike, quit it," Xander grumbled, but when he was pulled in that direction he gave a little sigh and leaned against Spike nonetheless, making a petulant sound once he was settled. Spike shifted to rearrange Xander into a more comfortable position, and glared at everyone else in the room.

"Well then," Willow said brightly, and motioned Giles and Oz into the kitchen.

Oz leaned against the counter and gave a sidelong glance at the couple on the couch before speaking. "Listen, I don't know what's up with Xander, but I think you should check out Spike next. He's acted kind of crazy all night. He seems a little . . . over-invested in Xander right about now. Any clue why?"

"Well, we have learned some things . . . but first, did you get a chance to speak with Angel?" Giles asked quietly.

"No, not with the negotiations still going strong." Oz shook his head thoughtfully. "Though . . . and this was really weird . . . at one point Angel came out of the room, stopped dead in his tracks, and growled at Spike."

"He did?" Willow asked nervously. "How come?"

"Not sure," Oz answered. "But they sort of muttered at each other, and Spike growled back, only louder and longer. And then Angel --"

"I imagine Angel can . . . scent that Spike and Xander have been intimate with one another," Giles said in a hushed tone.

"Spike and Xander?" Oz asked. "Huh. That's new."

"Oh, I keep forgetting that not everyone was here for every part of this," Willow fretted. "Yeah, when you were at Angel's Xander and I had a long talk, and he told me about it. I think he only came clean just then because he was worried that Spike had *done* something to him."

One side of Oz's mouth quirked upward. "You mean besides the obvious?"

"The thing is, he *did* to something to Xander," Willow continued in a whisper. "I mean, I guess it was both of them, or maybe someone else did it . . . and we're still not sure how they managed to trigger the spell, or who even planted the spell in the first place, but now Xander is pregnant and -
-"

"Xander is *what*?" Spike exclaimed loudly from the living room area.

* * *

Buffy screwed her lips up in concentration and swung her legs from her perch on Giles' kitchen

counter. Everyone except Angel had been there discussing the Xander issue for a while already, but she wasn't the only one still having a problem wrapping her head around the recent developments.

"Okay," she tried again. "So somehow Spike figured out a way to make you have sex with him. And then once he got you into bed, he got you pregnant -- or something!" she added hastily before Xander could object again to the bandying about of the word "pregnant."

"Way you say it, 's like I'm the only one responsible from start to finish. *He* was there too, joining in all of the fun," Spike said, looking affronted. He was sitting on the arm of the chair Xander had slumped in, and as he spoke he unthinkingly stroked Xander's arm. When Xander turned to glare at him, he scowled and removed his hand, regarding his chipped black fingernails with pretended interest.

"Just leave the Spike part out of it for a second," Xander said irritably as he faced the rest of them again. "The point is not so much with the sex or the getting as it is with the *pregnant*. That's not what's going on, is it? I mean, how?!? There's no way! No way!" He turned in his chair and looked desperately around the room for some support.

Willow smiled uneasily at him. "You know, normally I'd be right there backing you up on the 'how' and the 'no way' -- what with Spike being a vampire and not so much with the reproductive capabilities, and you both being guys, but we took samples, Xander! Hair samples! And these demonic pregnancy tests are 97.999% accurate." She waved the box at him.

"I'm still getting over the fact that there's a demonic pregnancy test that comes in a box," Oz remarked.

"Yes, well," Giles muttered.

Xander desperately latched on to the only hopeful part of the news he'd heard so far. "Hey! But that's not fool-proof, right? 97.999 . . . So there's still . . . like . . ."

"2.111%, pet," Spike said helpfully.

"Thank you! 2.1111111% of a chance that this test is wrong, and that's something, isn't it? And don't call me pet, Spike!"

"Sorry, pet," Spike mumbled.

"Why *does* Spike keep calling you pet?" Buffy asked from the counter. "I get that you slept together, but are you all of a sudden a couple too?" She shrank back when Xander turned furious eyes her way.

"I don't know why the fuck he keeps calling me that," Xander hissed.

"Oh, nice language," Spike retorted. "You going to keep talking like that when we've -- you've -- got a little one on the way? You need to set a good example now, pe-- . . . Xander."

"I do not! Have! A little one on the way!" Xander shouted.

Spike regarded him and snorted. "Yeah. Right. Because all those outbursts sure aren't caused by moody-making hormones."

Xander's eyes narrowed to slits. "Do you *see* how he's provoking me?" he asked the room in general.

"Let's all sit down, shall we? It would be wise to keep our composure as we try to figure this out," Giles urged.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Um, Giles? We *are* all sitting," Buffy pointed out.

"Do you want us to sit more?" Willow asked doubtfully from her spot on the couch next to Oz.

"We could *change* seats," Oz observed. At that Xander skittered up and plunked himself down on the couch. Spike looked plaintively after him.

"Why don't we keep to the matter at hand," Giles said impatiently. "Xander's pregnant, and it seems that Spike is somehow involved. Leaving aside the expected objections about Spike's presumed infertility because he's, well, dead . . . and Xander's inability to carry a child because he's male . . . and leaving aside the evident dislike that both of them have felt for one another up until this point, and leaving aside--"

"But can't we leave Spike aside--"

"No protests, Xander . . . if we're to establish what has occurred, it seems clear that Spike is integral to the investigation. We can't ignore that he was the one to . . . well, let's simply say that he was involved every step of the way."

"You could say it like that," Spike put in with a cocky smile.

"Oh god," Xander moaned into the couch cushion. Oz patted Xander's hair lightly. There was a low growl from Spike at that, and Oz just as gently moved his hand away.

"Best way to do this is to start from the top," Buffy said after a pause. "What do we know -- what happened first?"

"Well, the night they had sex was the one that Giles that sent Spike and Xander to get that package from Angel at the mansion . . ." Willow put in.

"Speak of the git," Spike sighed when the front door opened and Angel stepped through.

Angel regarded them all with a wary expression.

"I think maybe I can help to shed some light on this," Angel said.

"By all means, if you know anything that can help the situation, we're grateful for your assistance," Giles said.

"How do you even know what's going on, Angel?" Willow wondered.

"Spike," Angel said shortly.

"Geez, you told him already?" Xander griped. Despite their reproachful tone, his words seemed to release Spike to edge closer to Xander.

"Didn't tell him. Must have put two and two together, pet. Figured the first part out from the smell, but don't know how he discovered the other," Spike said in a low voice. He hovered close to Xander's spot on the couch, and when Xander didn't object he sat on the arm of the furniture, smiling slightly when Xander moved closer to him.

"So what's the story?" Buffy asked Angel. "And, um, what's up with *that*?" she asked in a quiet tone, gesturing towards Xander who was now unabashedly resting his head against Spike's thigh, his eyes closed as Spike murmured to him and trailed fingertips gently down his cheek.

"There may have been a love spell," Angel said evenly to Buffy and Giles after he had pulled them further into the kitchen.

"May have been?" Giles asked. "Was there one or not?"

"Maybe. And . . . maybe a pregnancy spell. The package . . ." Angel continued.

"That's some kind of package," Buffy observed.

"Well, I didn't know that Spike and Xander would *open* it to see what was inside," Angel said in an aggrieved tone.

"Hold up," Xander said. He raised his head, and Spike growled, baring his teeth at Angel for making Xander shift away. "You knew about what was inside? What might happen if someone looked in? And you let *us* be the ones to get it for you?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Angel offered with a frown.

"Oh boy," Willow said inaudibly.

"Sorry," Xander repeated after Angel incredulously. "You've got to be kidding me. *Sorry*? That's *it*?"

"Now, now, pet," Spike said in a calming tone, patting Xander's arm. "Let's hear him out out. Won't do for you to get over-excited."

"And you," Xander turned on Spike. "You should be on my side, not telling me to . . . and how do I know that you're patting my arm out of whatever all of this is or because of some stupid spell?!?"

Spike dropped his hand abruptly, and he and Xander regarded one another with apprehension.

"What's going on?" Xander said weakly.

Giles closed his eyes, pinching the meeting of brow and nose in evident frustration. Buffy bounced on the balls of her feet, her fingers curled into tight little fists as she scanned the room for something to punch. Oz's eyes followed Spike's hand as it came close to then shrank away from touching Xander's shoulder.

Angel looked about as contrite as it was possible for him to look.

"Alright," Willow said brusquely. "This isn't doing anyone any good. Angel, you stay here with me and Giles, and tell us everything you know. Buffy, you go and patrol before you start to get antsy and make us all nervous. And Oz . . . can you make sure that Spike and Xander get home okay?"

Everyone stayed still for a moment, and then they all began moving to follow instructions. Except Xander, who stared at Willow pleadingly.

"But Will," he started.

"You need to rest," she answered. "And Spike seems to need to be near you," she added carefully, not adding that Xander also seemed to need to be close to the vampire. "Just . . . go home and get some sleep, eat something. We'll figure out what we can and reconvene. He's not

going to hurt you, Xander, okay?"

"Not any more than he already has," Xander muttered as Oz shepherded him towards the door, followed by an extremely annoyed looking Spike.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 9 by EntreNous

After Spike and Xander left with Oz, Buffy went over to the weapons chest to grab something for her patrol.

Giles joined Willow on the couch, then nodded at Angel to begin. "Perhaps you should explain what exactly was in the package that Spike and Xander transported to the mansion."

"The cardboard box held the ingredients for two spells," Angel said shortly.

"Boy, they sure don't bother with nice containers for spells anymore," Buffy put in from the side of the room. "You'd think they'd invest in a special urn, or an ornate lead case. But I guess nowadays, it's all, just throw it all into a box and drop it off at FedEx . . ."

Giles shot her a look. "So those contents were the materials for a love enchantment . . . as well as a separate spell meant to enable conception."

"Sounded more like a two-for one deal," Willow said.

Angel nodded. "Right -- the pregnancy spell wouldn't work without the love spell also taking hold."

"I still don't understand how you could let Xander and Spike be the ones to deliver that box. You knew what might happen if they opened it," Willow said.

"Let's all remember that in fact I *didn't* know they'd open the box when it clearly said 'Do *Not* Open'," Angel said crossly.

"Come on," Buffy said. She paused her rifling through the weapons chest and made a sweeping gesture with a crossbow. "I mean, we are talking about Spike and Xander here."

Angel sighed. "Even so, the spells shouldn't have affected them. I'm still trying to figure out how they did."

"Why would that be?" Giles asked. "Should the spell have only targeted other types of demons besides vampires, or not have had any impact upon a human?"

"No, no . . . the two participants would have had to follow a certain order of steps." Angel shook his head. "And there's no way Spike and Xander did that."

Giles leaned forward. "Why don't you go ahead and tell us the specific steps?"

Angel ticked the list off on his fingers. "They would have had to touch while approaching the box, open the box's seal simultaneously from opposite ends, pull apart the actual flaps of the box at the same time, touched soon afterwards, and continued touching for a set period of time. At that point, the spells would have kicked in."

Giles cleared his throat. "I think it's safe to assume that either those steps are not in fact required, or that somehow Xander and Spike did, though unknowingly, follow the scenario precisely as you describe it."

"Either way, pregnant Xander. So you've got a lot of explaining to do," Buffy said to Angel.

"Can't you and I talk about this later? At home?" Angel asked her beseechingly.

"Well, Giles and I have more questions for you," Willow said. "But yeah, maybe you and Buffy --"

"Fine, fine," Buffy said. "A-patrolling I will go." She stopped, pointing the crossbow at Angel. "But I want the full update later."

When the door closed behind her, Giles pursued the topic once again. "I'm still not certain how it is that two *men* -- one of them in any estimation of the word fertile necessarily, well, lacking -- the other entirely without the biological capacity to carry offspring -- would be able to procreate in this instance, spell or no."

"Because it doesn't matter that they're men. The two beings who perform the spell can be any sex," Angel began.

"Because the Glaz'broth clan members don't have gender distinctions," Willow interrupted. "Not just in the social arena, but biologically too -- I read that just the other day, but it didn't seem that important at the time . . . That's what this all was, right? Part of your negotiation between the two clans? If one representative from each of the clans had agreed to take part in the ceremony, and then the two of them had fallen in love and produced a child, uh, demon --"

"'For this alliance may so happy prove/To turn your households' rancour to pure love'," Giles murmured. "Yes. A rather old-fashioned but time-honored way of forging alliances would have taken place."

"Only now the effects have been absorbed by Spike and Xander," Willow said excitedly. "They're compelled to be near one another, to love each other, even if they didn't like each other before. That must be why Xander's feeling nauseous and irritable when Spike's not around him. And why Spike is all possessive and cranky if anyone so much as looks at Xander."

"That would be an effect of the spell," Angel confirmed. "It's kind of . . . I don't know, insurance for the family-to-be, as well as for the truce brokered between the two opposing groups that the participants represent. Each one bands together to forge a bond. The one carrying the child feels better when the other is around; the one who isn't having the baby wants to stay there and protect his mate and his progeny."

Willow shuddered. "Progeny. That's just a creepy word right there."

Giles nodded thoughtfully. "Based on what you've told us, Angel, what we have now on our hands is not so much a spell as a mystical *result* of a spell."

"If that's the case, that's why the pregnancy must be testing as natural even though the spell was anything but," Willow observed.

"And Xander and Spike are, however much they fight it, going to stay in love and have this baby together. This isn't just a typical love spell. It's got the force of an enchantment designed to pull together warring factions and ensure merged desires for love and family for the two affected by it," Giles said.

"So the love is . . . sort of natural too?" Willow asked.

"The source of it is not, but yes, the emotions are very real, and unlikely to diminish even with the most powerful magical interventions," Giles said. "So Spike and Xander . . ."

"Are going to live happily ever after?" Willow offered weakly.

Angel shrugged. "As long as they don't kill each other first."

* * *

"I'll just see myself out," Oz said amiably when Spike had hefted Xander onto the fold-out couch and growled at Oz menacingly.

"Thanks, Oz," Xander called out. "Sorry about the --" he waved his hand at Spike's ready-to-rumble pose.

"No problem," Oz said. "I'll catch up with Willow and tell her you're here and okay."

Silence followed the gentle closing of the door. Spike paced back and forth for a while, then circled the perimeter of the basement as though he was casing the joint for any vulnerable points of entry. Xander tried to ignore him and closed his eyes.

An hour later, Spike sat tensely on the side of the bed, pointedly not looking at Xander. The uncomfortable silence continued as Xander peevishly rearranged himself on the mattress, tossing and turning and grumbling under his breath.

"Should probably lay still," Spike advised. "Better for the b-- . . . better for you."

"Feels too warm in here," Xander complained. "I know it's me, but I can't get comfortable."

"Right," Spike said. He stood up and began stripping off his coat, shirt, and t-shirt.

"Okay, that's not going to help with the temperature moderation," Xander said in a low voice. When Spike gave him a pointed look he hastily added, "And that is in no way an admission of finding you hot, okay?"

Spike's lips twisted in impatience. "Not trying to get you all hot and bothered, pet. Vampire, right? Cool skin? Should help with your situation."

Xander gaped at him for a few moments. "Do you mean . . . So you can make me all nice and cool, we're going to snuggle?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Call it that if you like."

"Okay," Xander said grudgingly. "Snuggle away if it's in the interests of comfort and good health."

"Shove over," Spike said in a blunt voice, but his touch was gentle as he shifted Xander away from the center of the bed and fitted his body behind him.

"I guess this is kind of nice," Xander said in a dreamy voice as Spike massaged his chest lightly.

"Can put up with it then, you think?" Spike asked with only a twinge of sarcasm.

A long pause elapsed.

"Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?"

"Are you kind of freaked out?"

Spike trailed a finger across Xander's collarbone and thought. "Suppose not. Feel better when . . ."

"When you're near," Xander finished.

"Right."

There was another very long pause.

"Me too," Xander admitted quietly.

Spike gently pressed his lips against the back of Xander's neck. "Should get some rest."

* * *

"Maybe I shouldn't go," Willow said to Oz.

Oz tilted his head in consideration. "To the Wiccan Unification Summer Session? You'd learn a lot there."

"But what if Xander needs me here?" Willow asked.

"Maybe he'll need you to learn stuff there first, before you can help Xander," Oz said.

Giles stepped around the divider of the kitchen and nodded. "Oz may be right, Willow. As yet we've no idea how we'll handle the situation of this baby coming to term, and even very little sense of how things will proceed from hereon in with the pregnancy itself. If you can gain any knowledge from your program . . ."

"So maybe I should go *because* Xander is pregnant?" Willow asked guardedly.

"Why don't you contact the session leaders, and inquire about possible leave-taking during the term?" Giles suggested.

"I *could* come back, I guess," Willow said. "In time for the . . . uh, birth."

"Especially if we had a better idea of how long this process will take. We may find out that perhaps you needn't return home early at all," Giles said. "In any case, it seems a shame to refuse the opportunity when the situation isn't dire."

"Other than Xander being pregnant," Oz remarked.

"Yes, quite," Giles muttered.

Willow was quiet for a few moments. "Could be dire soon though. Seems like maybe Xander is having a sort-of speeded-up pregnancy."

"How do you figure?" Oz asked.

"Well, the . . . conception . . . happened just the other night, and so far he's got symptoms that I'm pretty sure only fit someone who's been pregnant for longer than that. Nausea, fainting, the emotional swings . . ."

"Is that so?" Giles asked with interest. "I always thought those things began right away."

Willow glanced around the shelves in Giles' apartment, and looked befuddled. "Um. I guess none of us are really experts in this area. Do you have any pregnancy guides here?"

"No, no, I'm afraid not," Giles said. Then he brightened. "I do have the *Malleus Maleficarum* -- there are some fascinating passages discussing Satanic pregnancy --"

"I think what we need in this case is more your joe pregnancy book," Willow said. "I mean, Spike's *evil*, but still."

"I could ask my Aunt Maureen," Oz volunteered. "She's the last person I know who had a baby."

"And this would be the mother of your infamous cousin Jordy, the young boy who gave you the original bite that led to your becoming a werewolf," Giles guessed.

"And my Uncle Ken's wife, yeah," Oz said mildly. "She had another kid two years ago. The pregnancy and baby info she has should be standard issue."

"Well, it's a start," Willow said. "Can you call her and ask her some questions, without telling her too much about the reason we're asking?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," Oz said. "Nobody in my family is especially pushy."

"Great," Willow sighed. "I guess I'll go online and see if there are any websites that might tell us something."

"And I'll check my other books for information on the length of mystical pregnancies," Giles said.

For a while things were quiet except for the soft murmur of Oz talking to his aunt from the other room, and the occasional "Ah!" from Giles as he marked a particular passage.

"This isn't really that helpful," Willow said, looking pale.

Giles stood and went to peer over her shoulder. "It seems to have a compendium of sorts, complete with visual evidence -- but you've found nothing useful?"

"Well, I'm just reading about the start," Willow said. "Week one, week two . . . and all I know is that the baby isn't even the size of a grain of rice yet, and there's stuff about the uterine lining, which I'm pretty sure doesn't apply in this case, Xander not having a uterus and all. Then there's the visual evidence . . ."

"Are you all right, Willow?" Giles asked.

"I . . . a glass of water could be a good thing," Willow said, and laid her head gently on the desk.

"Yes, yes, of course," Giles exclaimed, and rushed to get one. "Oz! You may wish to come here."

"Willow go all funny?" Oz asked. He came back into the room with the phone. "You didn't watch a clip of a woman giving birth, did you?" he asked her as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't mean to," Willow said shakily. "I'm sorry, Giles. I might not be the best one to look the stuff up that features graphics. The whole bearing of children thing just gives me the willies."

"Well, let's talk other info then. Aunt Maureen says that she didn't start with the morning sickness till a month into it," Oz said, guiding Willow away from the computer chair and over to the couch.

"That fits with the website -- they said week four," Willow said before she took a gulp of the water Giles had brought her. "I guess not everyone gets sick to their stomach, but lots of women do."

"That is as much to say that currently Xander is exhibiting the symptoms of a typical woman four weeks into her pregnancy, and yet he only, erm, conceived four nights ago."

"What?" Buffy asked incredulously as she strode into the room. She laid down her crossbow and sank into one of the chairs. "Poor Xander. The pregnancy thing is freaky enough without the fast-action part."

"Good, you're back," Giles said absently. "We'll need your help researching for the remainder of the night."

"Except it's almost daybreak," Buffy noted, gesturing at the hazy world outside the windows. "As in, the day before Willow has to leave for her training."

"All the more reason to try to work out as much as we can right now," Giles said, pointing towards the stack of books beside him.

"Okay. So four nights, four weeks . . . that's, what, five weeks for this whole thing?" Oz asked.

"If we're lucky," Willow said. "Though it could be more advanced already, so that's the generous estimate. Four weeks, or even three, might be more like it."

"Four weeks, three weeks," Buffy mumbled as she flipped through one of the texts. Suddenly she looked up and gasped. "'Oh my god -- *two* weeks! We have to get Xander out of there right now!"

Oz, Giles, and Willow all turned to her.

"Two weeks? What's so special about--"

"Get Xander out of where, Buffy?"

"That *house*!" Buffy exclaimed. "If he looks four or five months pregnant in two weeks, don't you think that's going to seem kind of obvious to his parents? Xander's lease at his new apartment doesn't begin for two more weeks."

"I see your point. Is there any reason that he can't shift his belongings to this new apartment and begin his residence there early?" Giles asked.

"Think it was a money thing," Oz said. "Something about the agency wanting to charge more than half the month's rent to open the place up early, and after paying the security deposit, Xander didn't have any extra cash."

Willow frowned. "I don't think that extra money is something any of us have right now. Maybe we can--"

The door opened and Angel slipped in. "Good, you're okay," he said to Buffy. "Sorry I didn't meet up with you for the sweep; when I didn't see you at home, figured you'd be here." He slipped out of his leather coat, nodded at the others, and said more generally, "I think I've finally worked out another package for the Glaz'broth demons."

"Which none of us are touching with a ten foot pole," Oz remarked.

"Right." Angel leaned against the couch and brushed lint off of his Italian wool trousers. "So I

stopped by to see if I could be of any help here. If there was anything I could contribute."

"Well," Buffy said with a thoughtful look on her face. She perched on the couch next to Angel and laid her hand gently on the sleeve of his expensive silk shirt. "Now that you mention it . . ."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 10 by EntreNous

When Xander opened his eyes, all he could see was a pale haze. He blinked for a moment, and then his brain kicked into panicked overdrive. Murkiness, paleness, no discernible shapes or locations . . . what if he was going blind? It was probably an effect of mystical pregnancy . . . What if he was going to start losing all of his senses, and walk around in a weird blind pregnant daze?

Then he realized that he was, in fact, nosed right against Spike's paler than pale chest, and so he relaxed slightly.

"Awake, are you?" Spike's voice rumbled.

"What gave me away?" Xander asked with a yawn. He turned over onto his back, only getting halfway there before Spike was guiding him the rest of the way. "I can handle this part," Xander said, but he allowed Spike to ease him down.

"How do you feel?" Spike asked. He ran a hand up Xander's side, down his torso, and over his belly. "Don't seem feverish anymore."

"I feel okay, I guess," Xander answered. "That helps, I'm thinking," he added, since Spike seemed in danger of halting the glancing touch. Without a word Spike kept stroking over, up, down, around. Xander sighed and wriggled into a more comfortable position.

After a short while, the calming gesture became more heated, and Xander's breaths starting coming a little faster. "Still feel good?" Spike asked in a low voice.

"Yeah," Xander whispered back. When Spike drew up next to him and slid his palm to cup Xander's cheek, Xander's hands pulled him closer, and their lips met slowly, softly.

"I don't know if we should do this," Xander got out between kisses as he made a half-hearted attempt to pull away.

"Not like we haven't done it before," Spike muttered, pulling Xander back towards him.

"Well, yeah, and look what happened that time," Xander said indignantly. He gave Spike a little push and moved over, putting a protective hand on his stomach. "Whatever's . . . in here . . . we don't want it to double or triple up, do we?"

At this a faint look resembling something like hopefulness flitted across Spike's face, and Xander groaned. "Please do not tell me you think that's a swell idea."

"Probably nothing would happen," Spike scoffed. He pressed his fingers against Xander's thigh and frowned petulantly.

Xander shook his head. "No. Nuh and uh. None of that."

"Fine," Spike said shortly. He turned onto his back and for a few moments neither of them said anything.

"Well, not, you know, *never* again," Xander said suddenly.

"How's that?" Spike asked.

"I mean, if we don't know whether the hocus pocus is all pocus-ed out or not, we shouldn't do, uh . . . the main thing," Xander said. "But that shouldn't stop us from--"

"Right, yeah," Spike said quickly, and there was a platinum blur as he shimmied down Xander's body.

"Like that," Xander gasped as Spike's tongue rasped out over one of his nipples and then the other. "See? Just 'cause we can't . . . doesn't mean we can't . . . be . . . oh god . . . inventive. . ." He twisted towards, away from, and then back to the flickering wetness, biting his lip as the noises coming from Spike started sounding more like growls than groans.

Spike worked his way further down, marking a trail of kisses and licks with evident satisfaction. When he reached Xander's groin he paused for a second.

Xander had thrown his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes as he reached down to stroke and rub at Spike's back and shoulders, but now he looked at Spike in confusion.

Spike returned his gaze, heavy-lidded and intense, then moved up slightly, gently lowering his head to place a line of soft kisses along Xander's abdomen.

And that should have been freaky, but it wasn't. Xander thought that his heart was going to beat right out of his chest when Spike's fingers brushed against his stomach, and with a sigh he reached his hand down to touch Spike's cheek.

"What do you think . . . what's in there, Spike?" Xander asked in a whisper.

"Don't know," Spike said, pressing one last kiss against his belly. "But it's ours."

"Yeah, ours," Xander choked out as Spike shifted to pull down Xander's boxers and then to bury his nose against him, breathing in deeply. "Oh god," he said softly as Spike eased his lips in a tight ring over his cock.

* * *

"Angel's going to what now?" Xander asked blankly.

They'd been at Giles' apartment for a short while, but until then the conversation had been restricted mostly to a discussion of how Willow would remain in contact with the rest of them after she left the next day for her Wicca training.

"He's going to pay the extra rent so that you can move into your new apartment tomorrow," Buffy explained for the second time.

Xander stared. "Why?"

"Because he wants to help," Buffy said.

Beside her, Angel shifted uncomfortably.

"He doesn't look like he wants to help," Xander said warily.

"Feels guilty," Spike announced.

"Well, he should," Xander reasoned.

Angel muttered something unintelligible.

"Well, you don't have to worry about staying in the basement another day," Buffy said brightly. She covered Angel's hand resting on his knee with her own hand and squeezed hard, smiling in a friendly way when Angel winced. "We're going to move you tomorrow, and then you'll be all set up."

"That's . . . that's good," Xander said. His gaze flickered over to Spike, then back to Buffy.

"And we think Spike should stay with you," Buffy added after a beat.

"Oh," Xander said, bobbing his head in a nod. He looked briefly relieved, then frowned. "Well, uh . . . I object."

"What for?" Spike asked incredulously. "Just before we left, you--"

Xander raised his finger in an "ah-ah-ah!" gesture. "I'm making my standard objection," he said with gritted teeth.

"Pro forma, as it were," Spike said, suddenly relaxing. He slung his arm across the couch just behind Xander's back and shot Buffy a look.

Buffy returned the look with a shrug. But when Giles nodded at her impatiently, she blinked rapidly and spoke up again. "Pro . . . oh! Okay. Um. . . I insist?"

"Okay," Xander said, leaning over against Spike's side.

"Well, that's all settled," Spike said smugly as he combed his fingers through Xander's hair. Xander made a noise that was half-grumbly, half-content, and tilted his head for easier access.

"So that's pretty much it for tonight then," Willow said in relief. "Glad we could sort some of this stuff out before I have to leave. Then when we solidify the plans for the baby's arrival, we'll work out --"

"The baby's arrival?" Xander interrupted.

"Now's a good a time as any," Buffy murmured, and Willow took a deep breath.

"The way we figure, the gestation should take about three weeks," Willow said.

"Three weeks?" Xander asked incredulously. "How . . . what . . . three weeks? Three weeks and then *baby*? You won't even be here!"

"Oh, I'll come back before," Willow assured him. "We'll need to -- well, not we, because not so much with the mystical midwifery, personally -- you know, figure out how to induce the birth, considering Xander doesn't have any, uh . . ."

"Oh boy," Buffy said with raised eyebrows.

"Oh god," Xander said.

"Stay calm, pet," Spike told him.

"Yes, we should all remain calm," Giles said soothingly.

"How are you going to get the baby out?" Xander asked, making waving finger motions in the air

as he said the last word.

"Out?" Giles asked, unconsciously mimicking the gesture.

"Through the time-honored magic of jazz hands?" Buffy asked, eyebrows raised.

"Don't be absurd," Giles said shortly. He dropped his hands to his lap and glared at Buffy.

"I don't know if you want to underestimate the power of jazz hands. Or the hand jive," Oz remarked.

Spike had been staring at Giles during this exchange, and when he spoke his voice was filled with scorn. "You don't know, do you, how the baby will come out?"

"I do so know," Giles responded irritably. When Xander and Spike looked at him pointedly, he continued in a lofty tone. "The solution to a complex and atypical circumstance such as this of necessity is arcane, closely-guarded --"

"Are you saying," Xander asked, his voice shaking, "that it's a *secret*?"

Giles cleared his throat. "Well. Yes."

"Come on, Giles," Buffy said. She leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner. "We won't tell anybody."

"He doesn't know," Spike said with certainty.

"Giles?" Xander asked.

Giles paused. "In fact, some of the more specific details are as yet undetermined."

"Uh oh," Buffy said.

"Okay, unnaturally pregnant but extremely hormonal guy here," Xander said loudly. "Stop with the 'arcane' and the 'undetermined'. I'll handle it better if you can just say straight up that you don't have a clue."

"While I can assure you that I do indeed have a great many clues as to the way we shall proceed, I've yet to arrive at anything . . . well, definitive."

"Oh god," Xander said. "I'm so going to die."

"We'll work it out," Buffy said firmly. "Giles is reading like crazy, Angel is asking around, Willow's going to have a camp full of Wiccans to talk to, and I'm fully prepared to beat up all sorts of species of demon to get the information. We've got some time -- it's not like it's happening tomorrow, right?"

"Okay," Xander said suddenly. "I'm not going to freak -- well, no more than I already am. And speaking of tomorrow, I've got to get back so I can get stuff ready for moving. And for work. We'll talk more about this later, and . . . oh fuck, *work*!" He stood and gestured at himself with agitation. "I can't keep going in if I'm going to look like, you know, how I'm going to look! You said three weeks, right?"

"You could say you were trying for a meatier, stockier vibe," Oz suggested.

"Let's not cover all the heavy stuff tonight, okay? Work gets to be tomorrow's topic," Buffy

suggested.

"I kind of want to know that that's settled before I go," Willow said quietly, and Xander sat down again with a sigh. She moved to sit next to him on the couch, and though Spike's lips moved into a slight sneer, he made no verbal objection. Willow patted Xander's arm, and when he lifted it, she laid her head on his shoulder so he could wrap his arm around her.

"Can you take vacation time?" Oz asked.

"Don't have enough accumulated," Xander said. "Plus I don't really think I can all of a sudden cut off all sources of income. I mean, babies . . . or whatever, you know . . . expensive stuff."

"You shouldn't worry too much about the money right now," Buffy said, looking to Angel for confirmation.

"Fine," Angel said grudgingly. "I mean, three weeks -- how much can it all cost?"

"Well, and then there's the after part," Buffy said.

"After what?" Angel asked.

"After the baby is born." Buffy glanced at Xander with a clear *do you see what I have to deal with?* look on her face. "The baby will need all kinds of things, and I don't think Xander has that much money saved, and it's like we talked about earlier. With you having, uh--"

"Generous resources," Giles contributed.

"Resources, right," Buffy said. "Plus, besides it all happening because of you and your demonic pregnancy kit, the baby is kind of your family, and--"

"Whoa, whoa," Angel protested. "Wait a second here. *Family*?"

"Even if I don't have to think about the cash, there's still the little matter of making sure I don't get fired for needing unexplained personal *weeks*," Xander interrupted. "I won't get my union card for another two months."

"Oh! I know! We'll magic up a good old fashioned 'accident'." Willow crooked her first two fingers on each hand to air-quote the final word.

"You're not hurting him," Spike spat out, and he did snarl audibly this time.

"Not hurting Xander, of course not, never," Willow said quickly. "Just . . . make it *look* like he's hurt on the job. You know. For disability payments."

Xander stared at her, mouth agape. "You want me to commit insurance fraud?"

"Don't think of it as fraud," Willow said brightly. "Think of it--"

"As *fraud*?" Xander interrupted.

"Well, you do need to get out of work somehow," Buffy pointed out. "It's just going to be too weird for the guys at the site if you show there all knocked up."

"Because it's not enough that it be incredibly weird for me," Xander said bitterly. "Okay, point. But what am I supposed to tell my boss? How can I convince him I've had an accident, or that I'm sick or something?"

"Doctor Rosenberg?" Buffy said grandly, sweeping her hand over to gesture at Willow.

"Oohh, I can come up with a really great list of symptoms -- most of which you'll have anyway, so it won't be a lie or anything," Willow said cheerfully.

"Hey, now. That's super," Xander said weakly.

"And if Angel is fronting the apartment costs and baby expenses, then you don't need the disability money so much as medical leave," Buffy argued. "Can't be too hard to convince your boss that you have something that means you get time off, but also that he can't fire you while you're out."

"Right, okay," Xander said impatiently. "But what about the part where Willow leaves town tomorrow? She can't exactly play doctor from far away."

"Over the phone," Buffy said with a dismissive air. "She can call."

"I do think Xander is right to express concern," Giles said. "It might be best to make the contact from within Sunnydale. What if follow-up becomes necessary, or the so-called doctor's presence is required at some sort of hearing or legal meeting?"

Buffy pulled on one of her rings and nodded slowly. "Well, it should be someone really unflappable in that case. You know, to totally eliminate suspicion."

"Buff, you know I love you, but covert ops? Not exactly your strong suit," Xander said.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of me," Buffy replied. She cocked her head towards Willow, and Willow suddenly nodded.

"We'll take care of everything," Willow said affectionately to Xander. "You just go home, and rest, and don't worry. Even though I'll be gone, I'll be helping out, and everyone here will do their part, and before you know it, this will all be over."

"Yeah," Xander said. He stood and allowed Willow to hug him hard. "Over except for the part where I have, you know, a baby." He sighed and kissed her on the top of her head. "Okay. Have fun. Learn lots of witchy things. And don't forget about your pregnant friends at home."

"I won't forget, silly," Willow said. "And you'll see, this will all be easy as pie. Oz is going to help take care of the whole work thing tomorrow, and then--"

"I am?" Oz said. His eyebrow quirked and he cleared his throat. "Uh. Okay. How am I going to do that again?"

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 11 by EntreNous

"Henderson," the site manager introduced himself, shaking hands and gesturing to a seat in front of his makeshift desk. "So, I appreciate you coming all the way down to the site, Doctor, uh . . ."

"Osbourne," Oz replied. He brushed away a wrinkle on his pilfered lab coat and smiled.

The site head looked at him strangely. "You're a little young, aren't you, to be a--"

"Specialist of Gastro-Intestinal Disruption Syndrome?" Oz supplied with an arched brow.

"Uh. Yeah," Henderson said uneasily.

"I get that a lot," Oz acknowledged. He took a deep breath. "But the salient issue at hand is the critical disturbance experienced by Mr. Harris due to this grave and recently-discovered disorder."

Henderson took a swallow from his coffee mug and frowned. "When you called and described it, it sounded kind of . . . I don't know, weird."

"Oh, it's weird all right," Oz said. "As I've already explained, symptoms render the victim unable to operate machinery, perform mechanical tasks, or even stay on their feet for extended periods, incapacitating them for weeks at a time."

Henderson's eyes glazed over. "Yeah, well. That's too bad. But if Harris is sick, I need to hire someone else. I can't just keep his job open until he recovers from, uh . . ."

"GIDS," Oz supplied. "I think you'll find that you can."

Henderson shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but Oz took another breath and jumped in before he could start. "Especially considering that the production of waste materials not only in your particular industry but on this very site matches the top suspected environmental factors which scientists now believe cause the manifestation of this malady."

The other man gaped at him for a moment. "You mean . . . Harris got sick because of the site?"

"Yeah," Oz nodded. "That's pretty much it."

There was a long silence during which Henderson stared at the ceiling and Oz sat calmly in his chair.

"But he doesn't want disability," Henderson asked in a guarded voice.

"Not so much," Oz answered with a slight cough. "Hey, can I have some water?"

"Sure, sure," Henderson said distractedly. He left the room briefly and returned with a styrofoam cup.

After a few gulps, Oz cleared his throat. "All Mr. Harris wants is the assurance that he'll return to his job without penalty when he's better."

"How long will that take?"

"Six weeks, we're thinking," Oz said off-handedly. Then he sat up a little straighter. "That is, the team of scientists with whom I've consulted think that. That's the 'we'."

Henderson rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "But the other guys on site -- are they at risk from this thing too? I can't afford to lose my entire crew right now."

"Actually, my office would supply you with the treatment used for those with latent symptoms."

"Well . . ."

"Free of charge," Oz added.

"Great, that's great," Henderson breathed, relief clear in his voice. "Okay. Harris can count on working here as soon as he's better." He extended his hand across the desk and Oz shook it heartily before breaking into a cough once more. "You okay there, Doctor Osbourne?" Henderson asked.

"Yeah, fine," Oz said with a small grin. "This is just way more talking than I've had to do in a while."

* * *

Giles looked up from his research with a start at the slightly smoking vampire who had rushed into his apartment wearing a blanket. "Spike! Aren't you supposed to be helping with Xander's move to the new apartment? Did something go amiss? I had thought that the building manager had agreed to his early tenancy once Angel supplied the requested sum."

"Yeah, he did agree, and everything's set," Spike said. "And right now, Buffy's doing the heavy lifting outside, and Angel's rearranging everything inside."

"And Angel didn't want any help from you?" Giles inquired skeptically.

Spike snorted. "Not as much as he wanted me out of his carefully-styled hair."

"Ah," Giles nodded. "I see." He gave Spike a curt nod, and then looked back down at the book he had open.

When he turned to lay it aside and reach for another volume, he raised his eyes and frowned to find the vampire still there. "Was there something in particular you wanted? I mean, besides hovering about for no reason other than to distract me?"

"Been meaning to ask you about something," Spike said shortly. "Seemed like right now, with everyone else occupied and Xander going through the last of the things at his parents' house, was the best time."

"Ah. You wished to ask me something about Xander's condition?" Giles asked.

Spike picked up an object on Giles' desk and hefted it in his hand before putting it down again and meeting the other man's gaze. "Yeah. No. Well, not exactly, but yeah. About Xander."

Giles took off his glasses, and crossed his arms as he leaned back in his chair. "Xander isn't feeling poorly, is he?" He rubbed at the bridge of his nose and cast his glasses onto the desk. "Because though we're not entirely certain, we've been thus far charting our expectations of his state of health on a modified model of normal pregnancy for a female human. Any discrepancies or departures are a cause for concern, and you should come to me with any relevant details."

"No, no, it's not that," Spike said with a frown. "He's doing all right. Bit moody, maybe. Does keep trying to do things when I'm there and perfectly willing to take care of everything. That doesn't show much sense, does it?"

"Well . . . it's very . . . gallant of you to make an attempt to ease the burden of any arduous tasks for Xander, but I think it unlikely that you need to coddle him to that degree."

Spike waved that notion away with a flick of his wrist. "Just taking care of him is all. But that's not the question either."

"All right then," Giles sighed. "Go ahead with the question."

"Well." Spike glanced away, and then back at Giles. He looked at him blankly for a moment, moving his jaw slightly as though he was attempting to restrain his irritation, and then looked up, seeming to find something fascinating on the ceiling. "Well. You see, the thing is--"

"Yes, yes; do go on," Giles said impatiently.

"About Xander and his . . . conceiving. How long will it keep up? I mean, he's not going to keep on adding little . . . 'whatever they are'-s if we keep on . . ."

"Keep on," Giles repeated blankly. Then he nearly jumped in his seat, unfolding his arms with great haste. "Oh! Well, no, you needn't worry about that. The effects of the spell that resulted in the pregnancy should have worn off the very first night. It's not as though Xander will suddenly find himself carrying multiple infants if he engages in more, er, activities of that nature."

Spike looked hard at Giles. "So you're saying there's no reason to expect any more new mouths to feed, no worries about additions to stop me and Xander from --"

"Yes, it's true," Giles interrupted him hastily. "No obstacle, not in the least, in that particular area."

"Any other obstacles?" Spike asked gruffly. He brushed down the front of his coat and cleared his throat. "Risks to Xander? Or to the baby?"

Giles leaned forward and flipped through a stack of folders on the desk. "Well, if you'll just let me consult . . . let's see, I have the information . . . ah, here it is." He slipped his glasses back on and peered at the papers. "Yes, from the looks of what we know, you shouldn't attempt any . . . erm, acts of penetration after another week. We don't know all of the details, but with the baby growing, I think it inadvisable after that date."

Spike rocked back and forth a bit on his heels. "And if we shouldn't have at it after then, that means that the best time to have a go would really be right now." He frowned suddenly. "Wish we'd known about all of that last night."

Giles fumbled around for his glasses and nodded a few times in quick succession. "Well, yes . . . er . . . I think it was best to err on the side of caution."

"Yeah," Spike said with a sigh.

Giles regarded him for a few moments before speaking again. "I must say, I appreciate and am quite frankly a little impressed with your consideration for Xander and for the baby. I do hope that you continue this concern, and remember to keep in mind that next week such activities --"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Right, yeah, I get it. Next week, no funny stuff. But right now's fair game."

Giles immediately looked down and busied himself with replacing some of the papers, closing the folder, re-stacking the piles as they had been, and taking off his glasses with a flourish. "Well, now that that's settled . . ." he said loudly, hoping to move the conversation to something less agonizingly embarrassing. "Er . . . Spike? Spike?" He looked up at the spot where Spike had until recently been standing in vain, for Spike was nowhere to be found.

Buffy came into the shop, and looked backwards in the direction from which she had just entered. "Am I crazy, or did Spike just take off like a shot out of here? All I saw was a blanket, a peroxide blur and rising smoke, and poof, he was gone."

Giles shook his head. "You're not crazy."

"You okay, Giles?" Buffy asked him dubiously. "Want some water or something?"

"Good lord," Giles said faintly. "Were it not extremely awkward, I might consider actually telephoning Xander to convey a warning."

* * *

"Hi," Xander said absently from the couch when Spike entered the apartment. "Buffy and Angel set this all up, and then Oz gave me a ride over here with the last of the clothes. Sounds like his talk with my manager went okay, though from what Oz said, the poor guy was a little freaked. They have all the other guys on the site taking some placebo pill that Oz says is mostly made of Pez."

He looked up at Spike, who was standing tensely by the doorway, and shrugged. "Yeah, it's not like I'm all about this spot for the couch either. I don't know what Buffy and Angel were thinking, putting it here. But we can work on it later, where everything is going to go, and right now the main thing is that the heavy drapes are up on the windows. I mean, whatever this baby is, some kind of human-vampire hybrid, or worse, some kid of Glaz'broth-human-vampire hybrid, I don't want to worry about it coming into this world with one of its parents as a big pile of dust. Or worse, the *baby* turning into an *eensy* pile of dust before we figure out what it is. But anyway, that's set. And I was thinking, after we have some lunch, we should -- Um, hello!" he shouted in alarm when Spike charged at the furniture, scooped him up, and hustled them both into the bedroom. "What the hell has gotten into you? I can still walk, and if you wanted to see how Angel set up the bedroom, you could have just said so!"

Spike didn't even bother to look about the room as he put Xander on the bed and began stripping off his shirt. "You know how you were worried about the one baby becoming a passel of babies?" Spike asked.

"What the what now?" Xander asked dumbly as he watched Spike wriggle out of his jeans. "I was worried, and . . . oh god. Do you know something that I don't? Are we all of a sudden having triplets?"

"No, no; only the one," Spike said as he slipped off Xander's sneakers and pulled his socks off one by one. "Right, now, off with your jeans, love."

Xander began to unbutton but then stopped when he was only partway finished to stare at now-naked Spike. "Hey! That's it? That's the reason you just--"

"No, that's not it," Spike said as he batted Xander's hands away and undid the jeans himself. "Talked to the watcher, and--"

"Do you want me to go insane from none of this making any sense at all?" Xander demanded, clutching at his pants for all he was worth.

"What I want is for you to take off those jeans," Spike said in a perturbed voice.

Xander held out a warning hand. "Stop your wacky attempts to strip me nude, and explain everything in clear, simple terms, okay?"

"Fine," Spike said with a huff. "Watcher said there's no problem with there being more babies if we have a bit of a slap and tickle. And when I asked if it'd hurt the baby or you if we shagged, he said no chance of problems right now -- not until five days or so. But until then . . ."

Xander let go of the denim as Spike pulled off his jeans, but his forehead still held a crease of worry. "But you actually asked him . . . you know . . ."

"Yeah," Spike confirmed as he pulled Xander's t-shirt up his chest and tugged it off.

"And that explains this mad dash to the bedroom how, exactly?" Xander's muffled voice asked through the fabric temporarily caught over his head.

"Well, if we only have until next week," Spike said impatiently as Xander, ruffled and rumped and looking thoroughly confused, was at last naked before him on the bed.

Xander stared at him for a long moment. Then his eyes widened. "Oh! Well, damn. What the hell are you doing all the way over there, then? We only have, what, five days? Let's get a move on!"

Spike smirked and quickly moved onto the bed. He caught Xander's hand and pressed blunt teeth against its heel, smiling as Xander's breath caught. "Fancy taking advantage of the situation, do you then?" Keeping his eyes fixed on Xander's, he licked from the base of the palm up to the tip of Xander's middle finger and down again.

"I don't know what's going on," Xander said frantically. "But I think there's some kind of wiggy intensifying happening from hormones, plus the normal thing where I want to have sex all the time. And that pretty much means I want to have sex all the time plus plus *plus*, so this is a good thing and you really, really need to get up here and put your hands all over me and --"

Spike's lips covered Xander's mouth before he could finish, and they kissed each other frantically, moving further back along the bed, both of them panting from excitement.

"Slow down," Xander pleaded. "Don't want this to be totally over before--"

"Wasn't much of a problem last time, yeah?" Spike crooned in a low voice as he stroked his fingers through Xander's hair and moved on top of him. "What was it, pet, five or six time that night?"

Xander laughed a bit wildly. "Well, yeah, but demonic, Angel-ic spell influence that time."

"Think so?" Spike asked with a slow roll of his hips.

"Should probably try again to see," Xander managed to get out just before Spike shifted down to flick his tongue against his nipple. "Just in . . . oh god . . . interests of research."

"Right, research," Spike muttered against his chest as he reached to palm and stroke Xander's balls. "Research means I get to be inside you, right love?" he asked in a growl.

"God, yes," Xander answered. "Wanted to, last night, just didn't . . . oh," he gasped as Spike lifted his legs back a little and moved down to lick along his perineum. "Just didn't . . . uh . . . something . . . rapidly forgetting what . . ." he finished weakly. Spike nipped at Xander's calves before working them over his shoulders and easing further down to trace at the sensitive opening with his tongue.

"Want to get you nice and wet, all ready for me," Spike purred against him.

"Damn it, Spike, I'm ready already, and you should just. . . oh yeah," Xander whimpered when Spike darted his tongue in sharply. "Do that some more."

Spike grinned and obliged him. His appreciative murmurs sent a buzz through Xander's body until Xander was canting his hips up in quick little thrusts.

Xander pulled him up, fumbling to put the bottle of lube that Spike had tossed onto the bed into Spike's hand before he started to pull his knees back. But Spike shook his head then turned them both until he was on his back with Xander straddling him.

"You want to start out this way?" Xander asked.

"First time, yeah," Spike said shortly, his face drawn tight with effort. "Other way -- bound to go a little hard and fast on you right now, and don't want to hurt you or hurt . . . anything . . ."

Xander stilled for a moment before nodding, guiding Spike's hand back and giving a soft cry as one then two fingers worked their way inside him, stroking and caressing.

"You set the pace, love," Spike grunted out as he pulled his fingers away and finally eased inside Xander.

"Oh . . . oh fuck," Xander said helplessly once Spike was fully thrust into him. "Holy fuck," he whispered as he began to move, letting his head drop back as he panted and began a slow but shaky ride.

Spike moaned as Xander rose up and then sank down with his face flushed and eyes shining. "Feel good, baby?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"So good," Xander whispered.

After a few more thrusts, Spike slid the soles of his feet to the bed, raising his knees up so that Xander could lean back against them. Xander continued to move, alternatively stroking his cock and tweaking at his nipples as Spike helped guide him with his hands at his hips. "That's right, lovely," Spike encouraged him when Xander started to move faster. "Fast or slow as you like -- just don't stop, fuck, yeah . . ."

When Spike moved Xander's hand aside to pull at Xander's cock himself, slow suddenly wasn't an option for either of them anymore. Spike lent his strength to move Xander up and down faster, and Xander shivered with a groan before going rigid and coming hard.

Spike held back until the tremors shaking Xander slowed, snapping his hips up in a rapid volley of thrusts as he rode out his orgasm with a growl.

Xander began to move off Spike, rolling his eyes but accepting the assistance when Spike hurried to help ease him back into a reclining position on the bed. As Spike drew away, Xander caught his shoulder, pulling him back for a series of soft kisses.

"Should probably rest then," Spike said reluctantly, lifting his head to study Xander's expression. "Don't want to wear yourself out."

"What for?" Xander asked, bumping his hips up against Spike and grinning. "Got to take advantage of the time, right? And crazy as this sounds, I think the sex made me feel more awake and calm and just all around great -- better than I've felt since we figured out what was happening."

Spike stared for a moment, then laughed out loud. "If you say so, pet."

"I do say so," Xander said with an expression that was half-humorous, half-petulant. "Now c'mere."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 12 by EntreNous

"You had to tell them a whole week?" Buffy asked Giles.

"Well, how was I to know they'd spend all of that time in bed once I told Spike that it was safe for them to, er . . . er . . ." Giles rubbed at the bridge of nose and forehead. "And don't say 'This is Spike and Xander we're talking about!'"

She crossed her arms and gave him a look of pure annoyance. "Fine. I won't say it. But I would

like some face time from them, to make sure Xander's healthy and okay with all of this, and that Spike hasn't gone all obsesso-vamp."

"I think Spike was already at that stage before this week," Oz noted as he kept his eyes trained on the computer and scribbled something onto a note pad.

Buffy sighed. "No go on the internet searching?"

"Oh, I've got lots about baby names, and how to child-proof your kitchen," Oz said.

"But nothing on baby delivery for guys," Buffy stated, and Oz nodded. "You know, you'd think they'd have that kind of thing online."

"It might be buried on the web somewhere. Kind of hard to tell with all the porn," Oz observed.

Buffy hopped up onto one of the stools at Giles' kitchen counter. "What about on Willow's end? Hasn't she found any information at the Wiccan Unification . . . thing?"

"She mentioned learning how to make her enemies speak in tongues," Oz responded thoughtfully. "But no, on the mystical pregnancy and very real baby delivery front, nothing's turned up so far."

"I would have hoped her access to the program's volumes would have yielded something," Giles said as he paged through a sheath of papers. "In truth, I'm nearing wit's end here trying to locate anything in the books I already own or have been able to obtain."

"So what do we do when Spike and Xander finally decide to stop getting busy and rejoin the ranks?" Buffy asked. "We've got nothing--"

"Who's got nothing?" Xander put in as he walked into Giles' apartment right behind a wary-looking Spike.

"Oh!" Giles said brightly. "We were just conferring -- oh, good lord!" he exclaimed in alarm as Spike moved aside and Xander's very swollen abdomen came into view.

"Wow, that's some huge --" Buffy began and then stopped short. "Uh . . . huge time! Huge time that we haven't seen you and you should have called more often! We were worried."

Xander gave her a sour look. "I know what I look like, okay?" As he spoke, his hand moved, seemingly unbeknownst to him, to rest on his belly protectively.

"Sorry," Buffy said. "It's just . . . we haven't seen you in days, and it is a big change. I mean large difference. I mean huge, I mean--"

Giles broke in hastily. "I think what Buffy is trying to say is that of course as you're with child, your body would begin to reflect that. But in your absence we haven't had the opportunity to become as used to it as you no doubt have."

Xander snorted. "Used to it? You can't get used to a situation that's completely insane. It's getting so that I can't reach the faucets on the kitchen sink. And I think that whatever is in here is all mouth and stomach, because I'm hungry all the time. Oh, and in case you were wondering, no, they don't make maternity clothes for guys. So I'm currently sporting the skater boy big baggy jeans look, except that on me they're all fitted around the middle."

"Well, I think you look smashing," Spike said.

“You do have a certain glow,” Oz remarked.

Xander scowled at both of them. “I look like I’m on an all-milkshake diet. And since we have more time to go with this baby-carrying thing, I’m guessing that I will look extremely large and in charge before this is all over.”

“It is pretty unfair,” Buffy said. “If you were a woman, people would be asking when the baby’s due, or you could just tell them that you’re pregnant if they looked at you funny.”

“Oh, he’s been telling them,” Spike said as he maneuvered Xander onto the couch and then sprawled beside him. “You should see them back away slowly.”

“That was pretty funny, with that one woman in the supermarket,” Xander agreed with a grin. Then his look became serious. “So . . . what have you all got? Info about the baby? The word on how the delivery thing is going to work? Spill.”

Oz glanced at Buffy. Buffy shifted her gaze anxiously to Giles. And Giles lifted his eyes to the ceiling as though he was attempting to see through it.

“They’ve got nothing,” Spike said succinctly after the room had been silent for a moment.

“Oh, come on!” Xander said with impatience. “Nothing?” We’ve found the answers to prophecies in hours, the solutions to apocalypses in days, and you’re trying to tell me that we don’t have a working solution for the baby that’s going to insist on being born when there is nowhere out of me for it to go?”

“Er . . .” Giles said to the ceiling.

“But it wasn’t exactly ‘we’, right?” Buffy said. “You were off with Spike while Giles was hitting the books, the whole time Willow was losing sleep at her WUSS camp, when Oz has been searching online constantly, and while Angel has been worried sick--”

“Angel’s been worried?” Spike asked with raised eyebrows.

“Well. Mostly about how much the baby stuff is going to cost,” Buffy allowed.

“All right, all right,” Xander said with a sigh. “So we weren’t here helping out. But it doesn’t sound like there’s much we could have helped with.”

“Well, you never know what a fresh viewpoint will bring,” Giles said. “There’s every chance that with all of us working together, we’ll discover a solution very soon.”

“Very soon, great, fantastic. In time, pretty much necessary,” Xander said grimly.

“We’ll work it out pet,” Spike said in a soothing voice. “Won’t have you worrying, yeah?”

“Guess there aren’t objections now,” Oz murmured as Xander easily leaned into Spike’s embrace, their hands joined together on Xander’s stomach.

“They’ve gotten used to the spells,” Buffy said softly. “And like Angel said, it might have started with spells, but the results are real. Real pregnancy. Real . . . love. Plus, you know, what with a whole week of--”

“Well!” Giles said brightly.

Xander started, and then took a deep breath. “So Buff. . . what have you been doing amid all the

searching and not-sleeping and worrying?”

“Shaking down leads, mostly,” she shrugged. “Some dead ends, a couple that seemed promising at first but didn’t pan out. Nothing really helpful so far. But oh! I do have another one to follow up on tonight, so --”

“How about I come with?” Xander asked.

“Is that such a hot idea?” Oz asked. “With the . . .well, the pregnancy.”

“Trust me, it’s a great idea,” Xander said. “It’s making me crazy not knowing how this is going to work, and that can’t be good for . . . general health stuff.” He put his hand on his stomach again, and then just as quickly snatched it away. “Besides, if Buffy needs help putting the lean on her guy, I’ve got desperation and thirty extra pounds on my side to lend her.”

“And you would be quite all right, separated from Spike?” Giles inquired.

“We’ve tested it out a little and yeah, a couple of hours should be fine.” Spike nodded, and Xander waggled his eyebrows. “And hey, we’ve built up a lot of togetherness lately, so--”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Giles interrupted him.

“Maybe I’ll go kill some things,” Spike said thoughtfully. “Haven’t done that for a bit.”

“Aww, see? That’s right, you go enjoy your killing, and I’ll go ahead with Buffy to rough up her source,” Xander said enthusiastically.

“I’ll head out with Spike,” Oz said as he stood and stretched. “Think I’ve had enough computer time.”

“I’ll stay here and try re-examining that first batch of texts to make sure we didn’t miss anything on the first go-round,” Giles said. He sat at the table and drew one of the piles of books towards him.

“And then we’ll all meet back here later for punch and pie,” Xander said as he and Buffy headed towards the door.

“Yes, very amusing,” Giles said dryly.

“Oh, I’m totally serious,” Xander said after Spike had kissed him goodbye. “You’d better have punch and pie when we get back. That extreme hunger thing is no joke.”

* * *

“What do you mean, you’ve got nothing?” Buffy demanded of the small man they had cornered in a booth at a seedy bar downtown.

“I mean, sure, I’ve heard of this kind of . . . stuff,” the man said nervously, patting down the three strands of hair on his scalp that composed his comb-over. “But I never saw it myself, and . . . holy cow, how are you going to get that thing out of there?” he asked Xander with his eyes wide.

“You’re not helping,” Xander said angrily. “Buffy, he’s so not helping.”

“Listen,” Buffy said in a faux-friendly voice, leaning in close to the man. He cringed in response, trying to inch away from her. “My friend here is way hormonal, and I’m feeling way protective, so if you know anything, anything at all, you’d better--”

"I swear," the man said frantically. "I don't know any of the solution stuff you're after! I wouldn't hide anything from you, not from you!"

"Is it me, or does he seem like an overly eager informant beaver?" Xander asked out of the side of his mouth.

"Oh, that's because I roughed him up a little about something . . . was it a month ago?" Buffy asked the man cheerfully.

"Six weeks," he clarified, shrinking back into the booth a bit more.

Buffy scanned his face briefly, and rapped her fist on the table, making him jump. "Okay. I'll take your word. But if you find out anything, and I mean anything--"

"You'll be the first to know," the man said desperately. "Can I--"

"Be my guest," Buffy said scornfully, and the man slid out of the booth and high-tailed it out of the bar.

"And here I thought Willy was the only snitch in town," Xander observed with a shake of his head.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Buffy told him. "There's a whole underground informant base here. Makes the job a little easier." She blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Or harder, I guess, depending." When Xander leaned against the wall heavily, she patted him on the arm, and then guided him over to the bar. "Hey, let's get you something to drink. Maybe some water? Don't want you to get dehydrated."

"Seltzer is probably the best bet here," Xander said, glancing around the dank room suspiciously.

"A seltzer for my friend," Buffy told the bartender, handing over a few dollar bills. "Hang on a sec. I'm just going to run into the back, see if any of the other informants I know are skulking around."

"Good luck with the intimidation fun and games," Xander said, raising his glass of seltzer to her as she headed away. He slid onto a stool and sighed.

"Hey, Harris!" a voice called out.

"Oh . . . fuck," Xander said distantly as a crowd of his co-workers, some of them still wearing hard-hats, bellied up to the bar next to him.

"What the hell happened to you?" one of the men demanded, gesturing towards Xander's belly. "We heard you were off work, but no one told us about this."

"I . . . uh . . . well, you know I've been sick . . ." Xander began uncertainly.

"Wow, Harris, you really need to lay off the brewskis," another of the crew exclaimed jovially.

"But this is seltzer," Xander said, gesturing with his glass. That only made them snicker more loudly.

One of the men slung an arm around Xander as he laughed. "Hey, we were just talking about you the other day. And here we are, feeling bad because poor guy, laying at home, his knee all messed up or something. But really it's party time at Xander's place."

"It's not a messed up knee, it's a messed up . . . syndrome," Xander said lamely. "Didn't Henderson explain it all to you guys?"

“Oh, those pills they made us take?” one of the men said dismissively. “Listen, Harris, the truth is, you gotta cut back while you’re crashed out on that couch watching your ‘stories’. I mean, that and lay off all those nachos,” he finished to the accompaniment of chortles from the others.

He drew back his hand with a flourish, clearly about to poke Xander firmly in the stomach.

Quick-as-a-flash, Buffy was there, holding the guy’s arm behind his back and pressing him hard against the bar.

“Ow!” the guy cried. “Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!”

“Damn, Harris, who’s your crazy girlfriend?” one of the guys muttered. “Tell her to lay off.”

Buffy’s expression was harsh and dangerous as she twisted the guy’s arm further. “Yeah, see how you like it, you big meanie, about to sucker-punch a guy that’s--”

“Buffy!” Xander cried out sharply.

She released the arm she had in a twist-hold, and coughed. “Um -- a guy that’s -- not able to work because of a disease and then on top of it all gets . . . a . . . parasite.”

At the word parasite, Xander’s eyes began to tear up. Buffy patted his arm and glared at the group of men facing them.

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that, even if you’re joking,” Xander said forlornly. “It’s not . . . okay, I didn’t want it at first . . . but now, it’s part of me. Don’t treat it like it’s this foreign thing.”

The men exchanged looks with each other, and then with Buffy. One of them tapped his skull a little, and the others nodded wisely.

“Hey, I wasn’t going to really punch you,” the man with the twisted arm said. He raised both hands to show he meant no harm, wincing when the one Buffy had had a hold of apparently gave him a twinge.

“Sheesh, I didn’t know you were sick like that,” another one chimed in, a worried look creasing his brow.

“Did something happen with your knee that . . . made you get the, uh, ‘parasite’?” a third asked with some trepidation. A few of the guys raised their eyebrows and then took a not-so-discreet step back.

“My knee’s not even messed up and even if it was it wouldn’t be related, and it’s not catching!” Xander said loudly.

“Okay, that’s okay,” Buffy soothed. A few of the men looked at her sympathetically.

“I am not crazy,” Xander insisted. Everyone nodded kindly, and made their goodbyes in soft, non-threatening tones.

Xander shook his head as he watched them leave the bar. “Great. So now at work they’ll think that I think that I have an alien object growing inside me, sucking my will to live, and making me psychotic.”

Buffy cleared her throat. “Well, that’s a little bit what it’s been like, you know?”

He looked at her blankly and for a moment she thought she had said the wrong thing entirely. Then his face cleared and he laughed. "That was . . . okay, that sucked. You know what I think I need after that?"

"What's that?" she asked, covering her mouth with her hand as she giggled at his grin.

"Chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate."

"That I can get for you," she said confidently. "Come on. I keep a stash back at Giles' place."

As they got closer to the door, Xander slowed his pace, and Buffy looked at him with concern. "Oddness," he explained.

They came to a halt, and she cleared her throat. "You know, I didn't mean the -- the thing about the parasite--"

"No, I know," Xander said. "Just back there, with the guys . . ." He shook his head before he continued. "It made me realize the really weird part out of everything that's happened."

Buffy nodded and stood very still, unconsciously bracing herself before Xander spoke again.

"It's not just that I have to do this, or I'm willing to -- but I want it now. The baby -- actually wanting it -- I guess I didn't expect that part."

"That seems good," Buffy said softly. She reached out gingerly to touch his stomach. "Do you think that's maybe because of the spell?"

He looked down at her small hand on his abdomen and took a deep breath. "Nope. The magic voodoo whammy might have started everything, but this feels pretty damn real to me." He glanced up and smiled when he saw she was watching him intently. "And I'm starting to think . . . nah, forget it."

"What?" Buffy asked. "Come on," she said in a teasing voice when he hesitated.

"I think I just might make an okay parental-type guy," he said quickly.

She smiled widely at him. "You'll be a great dad."

Xander gave her a tentative nod, and then suddenly grinned as they exited the bar. "I sure hope so. Otherwise, Angel's going to have to pay a hell of a therapy bill for that kid down the line."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 13 by EntreNous

Author's Notes:

This part is 3,649 words, and is dedicated to luvxander, who has been an enthusiastic reader of this story from the beginning, and who is luckily doing okay despite all of the aftermath of Katrina in his region.

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[Back to index](#)

Chapter 14 by EntreNous

A few days after the unsuccessful information gathering and run-in with his co-workers, Xander rose early one morning while Spike was still sleeping, put on a pair of jeans with too-large legs and too-tight waist, and began to toe on his sneakers. He scuffed his right foot in harder when it wouldn't ease into the shoe on the first two tries, then sat down right on the floor and attempted to stuff his foot into it. When he made an attempt with the left shoe, his foot got no more than two-thirds of the way inside.

After counting to twenty slowly and then trying to restart the shoe-wearing operation a few more times, Xander gave up with a muttered curse. He grunted as he righted himself into a standing position, nearly pulling the couch on top of himself when he grasped the back of it for support.

Once he was finally upright, he sighed as he cradled the receiver of the phone in his hand and hit the speed dial. He didn't wait for the person on the other line to speak, just dolefully muttered into the first intake of breath that he heard after the click. "Shoes. Need more shoes again. Got to go to the mall."

"Again?" From the bedroom, a startled voice drifted out from under the pile of blankets on the bed that Xander had just left. "How can you need -- *again*?"

"Stupid vamp sonic hearing," Xander muttered. He turned his attention to the phone again, waiting through some incoherent squealing on the other end of the line before he finally got a reply.

"Shoes!" returned Buffy's ecstatic voice through the receiver. "Sale at Neimann's! Angel's buying! And then we can get iced mochas! And scones!"

"Pick me up in an hour, 'kay?" Xander said by way of goodbye, sliding the phone back onto the base afterwards. He stalked over to the plastic storage bin in the corner of the room that he was throwing his castoff too-small shoes and sneakers into and sighed.

"How?" Now when Xander glanced in the direction of the bedroom, a shock of blonde hair was visible through an opening in the covers. A Spike-shaped lump shifted, then sat upright while still under the comforter. "I mean, do your feet grow overnight? This has got to be the third time --"

Xander stood poised over the container, the offending sneakers in hand. "I know that. Don't you think I know that? What I don't know is why I keep needing bigger shoes." He frowned at the pile in the bin as Spike eased out of the bed and came to lean against the doorframe.

"Think it's something to do with the spell?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm . . . bloated? Buffy says she gets some kind of water-retaining thing happening when she gets her period." Xander put his hands on his hips and frowned at what he could see of his feet. "And you know, I actually sat there and nodded sympathetically when she explained all about the bloating to me in minute detail, which tells you something about my less-than-stable state of mind."

Spike shook his head, taking a few steps closer as he inspected Xander's feet. "You know, it could be all that weight you've been gaining that's making your feet spread."

Xander looked up, dropping a second pair of shoes into the container with a clatter. "My feet are *spreading*? When do you think they stop spreading? Will they stop? How far can feet spread? Oh my god. Am I going to be walking around with clown shoes on soon?"

"Course not, pet," Spike soothed. He moved close enough to run his fingers through Xander's hair comfortingly. "Clown shoes are normal-like. They just have a fake front so they look extra long. No clown shoes for you."

"Are you saying," Xander accused as his voice rose to a distressingly squeaky level, "that even if I *wanted* them, they'd have to make clown shoes *special* for me to wear? With my Clementine-like Scuba-Flipper Sized Big-Foot Dogs?"

"Now, now," Spike said ineffectually.

Xander twisted his fingers slightly in a manner that in no way resembled wringing of hands. "My feet will become so huge that soon even shoeboxes are going to be too small! Am I going to need to leave the house with milk crates strapped to my soles with *twine*?"

Suddenly Xander stopped mid-rant. A beat passed.

"Spike. Did you just say to me *with all the weight you've gained*?"

"Well . . ." Spike began to inch away in alarm. He seemed to be searching frantically for suitable words, but he only managed to make a few sputtering sounds.

"Don't say it!" Xander suddenly shrieked at the same time that Spike said nervously "Stay calm, love, just -- just stay calm."

Xander threw back his head and let out a howl. "I *am* calm! If you don't think I'm calm -- well, you don't know from calm!!! This is nothing to get uncalm about! This is -- this is . . ."

Xander stopped abruptly.

His eyes widened.

Spike's gaze darted nervously back and forth in search of escape, from the floppy mess of the covers on the mattress to the door directly behind Xander that led to the hallway outside the apartment.

Xander burst into tears, ran into the bathroom, and slammed the door.

After glaring at the sneakers that were to blame for everything, Spike picked up the phone and hit redial. "Slayer? Make it an hour an' a half, alright?"

There was a clatter from the bathroom, followed by heated cursing and a muffled sob or two.

"Make it two hours. And you'd best bring doughnuts."

The trip to the mall was a huge success.

Buffy convinced Xander to buy a few pairs of shoes a half size up in addition to the ones that already fit just in case. "And if you don't need them, you'll just keep them in the box and return them. And if you **do** need them, then it's like you saved money for when you **will** need them, because, you know -- "

"Sale," said Xander cheerfully. "Guess it's like Angel's the one who saved the money, though, considering he's footing the bill."

"That's true," Buffy said with a frown. "Plus, we saved even more with the special card-holder's coupon that I had. Angel should thank me when we get back. I'm practically earning him cash."

Xander nodded. He'd spent too much time around girls not to know how their monetary calculations allowed them to earn money by spending it. "That's extra money for delicious whipped coffee drinks, though," he offered.

Buffy grinned at him as she flipped up her ringing cell phone. "Angel? We'll be back after we load up on carbs and sugar."

Xander sat on the bench nearby and scouted the area for bathrooms. He had to go all the time, practically, and even when he didn't he went just in case.

Buffy listened to Angel talk while she pursed her lips at her nails. "What was that? Oh, okay, a . . . I've never heard of that kind of demon. Well -- we'll have to wait until tonight, anyway, so there's no point in me and Xander rushing back . . . Oh, and guess what? We bought Xander a bunch of shoes, but you barely paid a fraction of what they're actually worth."

Xander shrugged when he heard Angel's voice raising.

Buffy nodded impatiently at something Angel said. "Hmm? You can tell me all about it later, honey. I'm going to take Xander out to lunch with the money we saved from the shoes." She clicked her cell shut on the sputtering Angel-sounds and smiled down at Xander.

"Are we lunching?" Xander asked with good cheer. When she hesitated, he patted the spot on the bench next to him and after she sat down waited for her to speak.

"Xander? I'm glad -- I mean, I'm not glad Willow is out of town right now, but . . . I guess I'm just glad that I'm the one around for some of this stuff." She gestured towards the shoes, around the mall, and at Xander himself.

Xander grinned back at her. They all silently acknowledged that Willow was the anchor that centered them as friends. Willow was his best friend and always had been; there was no question about that. And as much as Xander got Buffy in some ways, Willow knew what was going on in Buffy's mind before Buffy even knew it. Yet here the anchor was away on matters Wiccan-related, and here the two of them were at the mall, smiling at each other like a couple of goons. Granted, he was the goon who was goonishly pregnant, but it was still a nice moment.

Buffy moved closer to him on the bench, and slid her arms neatly above his large stomach as he bent to kiss the top of her head. "I'm glad, Buff . . . glad I could have you here for this."

She burrowed her head into the point where his shoulder and neck met for a second, and he smoothed her hair gently. Then she drew back laughing and pulled them both to their feet. "Let's

go -- there's a really pricey French bistro that just opened up!"

"Angel will love hearing about that," Xander said agreeably as they headed towards the restaurant arm-in-arm.

* * *

Xander was already sporting the half-size-up sneakers a few days later when he joined Buffy and Oz and Giles for a research roundup.

"I feel sure that we're coming closer to a feasible solution," Giles said emphatically, breaking a long period of silence.

Buffy, Xander, and Oz exchanged glances from their positions sitting in a row on Giles' couch. Xander had been staring blindly at his musty text for the better part of an hour, Oz had taken notes from the volume on his lap with the occasional "huh," and Buffy had been frowning at her book, turning it around at regular intervals to try to determine which way was up.

"Anything from Willow's end?" Xander asked Oz.

"Nothing yet." Oz shrugged and scratched his elbow. "Though she's having her Coven-Forming Seminar friends focus their energy on the problem."

"Well, we've got to come up with something soon. Angel's going crazy about it," Buffy said with a sigh.

"The bill for the crib and the bassinette got there?" Xander asked sympathetically.

"And he saw the receipt for the Baby Gap shopping spree," Buffy said in a low voice.

"But we don't know if it's a boy or a girl or a . . ." Oz waved vaguely. "How can you buy it clothes yet?"

"We got sets of both just to make sure," Buffy said. "And socks! Socks are gender free."

"Trust me, we can dress the baby in pink or green or blue or whatever, and it won't care," Xander said. "When I was a baby, I wore my cousin Susan's cast-offs, and it didn't affect me at all."

"I've seen the pictures from Willow's album," Oz confirmed. "You looked cute in lilac."

"See?" Xander asked pointlessly. He turned the page of his book and blinked rapidly at it. "You know, we're never going to figure this out. Too bad *I'm* not a Glazbroth. Bet those demons have the solution all worked out for their pregnant pal."

Buffy nodded but then wrinkled her nose. "But somehow if you could see the scales you'd be sporting, I'm guessing that wouldn't seem like such an attractive option."

"I don't know," Xander said with a grin. "Scales, you never know when those are going to come in handy, and--"

"Yes, of course," Giles interrupted excitedly. He pulled off his glasses in one swift motion. "This is precisely the path we should have been pursuing!"

"Uh, Giles?" Xander broke in. "See, I think you missed the idle chatter part of that exchange. I'm not *really* looking to be a Glaz'broth demon, and while scales would probably help with patrol, I'm thinking they'd cramp my style overall."

"Ask the Glaz'broths what they will do for their impregnated kin!" Giles continued on. "I cannot believe that such a solution did not occur to us before this moment!"

"Oh, yeah," Oz said in surprise. "That would be a thing."

"I call finders fee," Xander said quickly. "What?" he asked when they all turned to face him. "So I didn't figure it out exactly, but if I hadn't been saying whatever came into my head out loud, you wouldn't have worked out the answer, right?"

"So we get Angel to talk to the clan leaders -- explain what's happening and see if they can point us in the right direction," Buffy said. "I'll go find him now, see how soon he can meet with them and get the scoop."

With that she gave Xander's hand a squeeze and headed out the front door.

"Finally," Giles said as though to himself, rubbing his eyes before putting his glasses back on. "At last it seems as though this will all work out with no danger or life-threat--" He stopped when Xander stared at him disbelievingly. "Er. Not that it wouldn't have worked out perfectly well all along. Of course, I have had every confidence -- That is to say -- when one considers --"

"You might want to stop there," Oz advised kindly.

"You know, if my feet didn't kill me, and every part of me didn't creak when I tried to stand, I'd so be contemplating thwacking you on the head right now," Xander said in a conversational tone. "As it is, I'll just say you owe me mint chocolate chip ice cream."

Giles sighed. "Xander, you can hardly blame me for wanting to relieve as much worry from you as possible. I'm sorry I wasn't clearer about my misgivings to start with, but I did have your welfare in mind."

"Yeah, 'course," Xander said in a quiet voice. "It's not like it hasn't occurred to me, you know, that . . . this could be a dangerous thing." He glanced down at his body and then looked up at Giles soberly. "But we don't know if this will work either, do we?"

Giles sat next to Xander on the couch and gave him a few awkward pats on the knee. Oz nudged him reassuringly from the other side, and closed his book solemnly.

"I don't wish to mislead you, Xander," Giles said. "No, we can't be sure until we hear what the clan leaders have had to say. Right now, though, it's the only hope we have."

Angel, as the arbiter of the earlier demon truce, did get the Glaz'broth to weigh in on the situation, though after two nights of meetings had passed Buffy and even Oz were far jumpier than usual. When Buffy asked Giles how Xander could stand the waiting, Giles offered his theory that Xander's oddly calm behavior was induced by a steady supply of ice-cream.

Spike was the most edgy, not least because Angel had effectively banned him from the confabulations, and his rapid pacing and menacing mutterings eventually sent Buffy out on the third night to go see if Angel was ready to report back.

"Not like I don't have a direct interest in things," he grumbled to Giles. They'd had a call an hour earlier that Buffy and Angel finally were due to arrive with information, and had all agreed to gather at Giles' apartment.

"I believe that was precisely the reason Angel felt you might hinder the proceedings," Giles noted.

"Could have sped it all up," Spike said with conviction. "Angel's taking entirely too long, letting those demons set the pace."

"Guess they are the ones with the info; they get to go at their speed," Oz said. "Plus . . . did they even know about Spike and Xander and how exactly the first box of magical spell stuff got put into play? 'Cause I'd bet that news would take up some explaining time."

Xander looked up from his spot on one of Giles' kitchen stools and put down his bowl of cherry chocolate-chip with fudge sauce on the counter. "Hey, I never thought about that. Maybe they're really mad at us for that. Do you think --"

"Hey," Angel said quietly as he opened the door. Buffy followed inside on his heels.

"Are they mad?" Xander asked them anxiously.

"They've had time to deal," Buffy said dismissively. "They got their stuff eventually, and they've been totally focused on the baby demon on the way. So mad . . . was not the reaction."

"What happened?" Spike demanded. "You get them to help us? What happens next? And if they didn't tell us anything, when do we get to beat them to a pile of bloody scales?"

"Relax," Angel growled. "It took a little while to get the terms settled, but now that they know about Xander's condition, they've agreed to share their background delivery techniques for a parent who isn't equipped for it."

Giles stepped forward. "Buffy said that they weren't angry, but what did the Glaz'broth say when they found out about Xander's condition?"

Buffy and Angel exchanged glances. Angel folded his arms and then unfolded them. "They, uh . . . well, they thought it was kind of funny," Angel answered.

"*Funny*?" Xander asked in a high-pitched voice as he held his ice-cream bowl close to his chest. Buffy crossed the room quickly to stand beside Xander.

"Part of it was, well . . . what's going on with you. They didn't know it could work on a human," Angel explained. He waved his hand in the vague direction of Xander's belly.

"Well, I'm glad I gave them a chuckle," Xander said sharply. "Wacky human here, all about amusing the demon world with my pregnant antics."

"What was the other part?" Oz asked.

"They thought we were kind of dumb not to ask them about it before now," Angel said neutrally.

"Now wait just a minute," Giles started in. "Had we known that they would have information to share, we would have asked them far sooner."

"Okay, fine," Buffy said briskly. "We may have dropped the ball at first, but we figured it out. The point is, they can help, and we don't have to worry any more about how this thing will work."

"Besides," Xander said almost as if to himself. "They probably do this kind of thing all the time."

Angel cleared his throat. "To be honest, they only do it once every four hundred years or so. For

the first part of the spell even to take effect, moons and things have to be lined up the right way."

"No wonder they got miffed when Spike and Xander hijacked their box of sparkles," Oz remarked.

"So with a cycle of four hundred years, it's not like they get tons of chance to practice," Angel concluded.

"And that is so not a comforting speculation," Xander muttered.

"Yes, they only do it every four hundred years. But these guys live forever, so this is practically old hat to them," Buffy assured Xander.

"Just tell me how it works," Xander said. He took a deep breath, and allowed Spike to guide him over to one of the comfortable chairs around the coffee table.

"That's the best part," Buffy said with a bright smile. "They just lay their, uh, hand-like appendages on you and poof, there's the baby. No muss, and not so much fuss."

"Poof," Xander echoed. "That easy, huh?"

"They won't just poof everything into some portal, or hurtle the baby through the ether, will they?" Spike asked.

Xander made a small, strangled noise and Buffy shook her head at Spike. "Stop that. You keep getting yourself and Xander over-excited. It'll be fine. Xander'll be fine. The baby will be fine."

"The baby will be fine," Angel repeated firmly to Xander. Xander nodded and took another deep breath, but he did seem far more relieved.

"The baby?" Spike stepped back suddenly, as though the wind had been knocked out of him. He stumbled a bit then sank heavily into a chair that Giles had discreetly slid towards him. "Baby," he rasped.

"Exactly. The baby," Buffy said with some annoyance. "Now, Giles and the book knowledge are definitely going to come in handy here. Angel skimmed some of the volumes that the Glaz'broth gave us, and there's some stuff about what we'll need for the birth --"

"Air," Spike said frantically. "Got to get some air." He got to his feet and lurched unsteadily towards the door.

"Oh, like he even needs to breathe," Xander said under his breath as the door slammed. He shrugged his shoulders as though it was no big deal, but his eyes were trained on the exit route Spike had taken. "Hell of a time finally to get what's happening."

"Maybe someone should go talk to him," Buffy said to Angel in a quiet voice as she quickly moved closer to him.

"Yeah. Probably help, talking," Angel agreed. He looked at Buffy, at Giles, at Xander, at Oz, all of whom were looking back at him. "What?"

"Maybe *you* should be the one to talk to him," Buffy said. She placed her hand on his arm reassuringly. "You know. Vampire to vampire."

"Me?" Angel asked incredulously. "Why should I --"

"You want to stay here and help out on this end?" Buffy asked him in a low fierce voice, tilting her head towards Xander, who was turning a deep shade of red and opening his shining eyes very, very wide.

"Talk, right," Angel said in a rush, almost scrambling to leave the apartment.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 15 by EntreNous
the situation, but--"

"Ow, ow, ow," Xander wailed.

"Why would Angel leave without me?" Buffy burst out.

"Probably for the best," Giles muttered. He turned a page forward and then back, marking the passage before going to his cupboard to obtain necessary ingredients for the process. "Though you went with him the last time, it may be advisable not to introduce a slayer into the midst of the clan during times of crisis, which was of course why you didn't attend the negotiation of the truce. Angel will be approaching them with speed, asking them to rush to our assistance, and all must be handled with the utmost delicacy."

"Yeah, but he's got no reason to keep me away from them," Spike growled. "I would have made those Glaz'broths hurry over here right quick."

"How about Angel left you here because you need to be around for the damn birth," Xander exclaimed. "Stop worrying about yourself and trying to weasel out of the weird parts of this."

"Hey! Do you see me weaseling?" Spike asked indignantly. "I'm right here!"

"Ow," Xander whimpered pitifully, and Spike hastened to stroke his hair and try to make him more comfortable.

"Oh dear," Giles said in a low voice.

"Oh dear **what**?" Spike asked.

"Er . . ." Giles looked up from his book and closed his eyes briefly. "I didn't realize we'd be needing eye of newt when Angel and Buffy gave me that list of what was required earlier. I seem to be out."

Buffy crossed over to join him behind the counter and raised her eyebrows at the different ingredients spread out. "Can't we substitute something else?" she asked.

"Maybe eye of salamander?" Oz suggested.

"Usually, yes, that would make an acceptable replacement. But not this time, I'm afraid," Giles replied.

"Hey, how did you know about eye of salamander?" Buffy asked Oz.

He shrugged. "You hang around Willow, you pick up a few things about spell ingredients."

"Oh great," Xander interrupted them. "Everything is going to go to hell in a hand-basket because **someone** was too lazy and cheap to replenish his high-quality amphibious eye supply. Now the baby is in trouble, I'm going to **die**, and did I mention that this **hurts like hell**?"

"No one's dying," Buffy said firmly.

"That's right, love," Spike said in an undertone. "Nothing's going to happen to you while I'm here."

"Ow," Xander said pointedly. But when Spike knelt on the rug beside the couch and put his arms around him, Xander immediately laid his head on Spike's shoulder with a distressed noise.

"I'll go out and pick some up," Oz volunteered. "You want me to get anything else?"

"How about something to make the pain get gone?" Buffy asked in a low voice.

"The demon will do that when he arrives," Giles said. "We shouldn't interfere with the process. For now, best to hurry."

Oz nodded and left the apartment at a jog.

A moment after the door had closed after him, Angel entered, his eyes darting back and forth. He seemed unaware that he was in full game face.

"Where's the demon?" Buffy asked.

"The demon's not *here*?" Spike demanded. He rubbed Xander's torso anxiously when Xander tried to sit up.

Angel growled at the room in general. "They're on their way," he snapped.

"You said there would be poofing!" Xander hissed suddenly, brushing away Spike's hand when Spike tried to get him to relax.

"What?" Buffy and Angel asked in unison. Angel looked surprised, shaking his head after he touched his face until his expression was human once again.

"You said, when I *specifically* asked if this would hurt, that the Glaz'broth guys would lay their hands on me, and *poof*, there would be the baby!"

"Well, yeah, once they get here, and once it starts . . . um, poof," Buffy said in a small voice.

"But before the poofing, extremely horrible pain?" Xander gasped out. "Like bamboo under the fingernails pain, but magnified a gazillion times and *everywhere* on my body?"

Buffy took a step closer to the couch, and her hands fluttered around Xander as though she could somehow stop whatever was happening to him with her touch. "Um. Maybe?"

"Damn it," Xander shouted hoarsely. "This fucking hurts!"

"I'm sorry!" Buffy said in a desperate tone.

"Buffy, come on," Angel said quietly. "Stop apologizing to Xander. It's not your fault."

"That's right," Xander said. His eyes had gone very wide. "It's *your* fault!"

"He does have a point," Spike remarked.

"You stay out of this," Angel warned in a low voice.

"I'm already in it," Spike said, taking Xander's hand so that they could join in glaring at Angel and

Buffy together. "I'm the bloody father."

"I'm the freaking father too," Xander grumbled, and Spike turned all his attention to Xander, speaking to him in a whisper as he stroked his arm and petted his hair.

"If the Glaz'broth are on their way, this will soon be far easier on you," Giles said. "Let us try to focus on that." The door opened, and everyone's head swung towards it.

"Got what we needed," Oz announced as he slipped through the door and held up a paper bag. "They had to go in the back to get the newt eyes, so that's why it took me a little while."

"No, that was really fast. And we're only staring because we thought you were going to be a demon," Buffy explained.

Oz blinked. "Only sometimes."

"Ow! Ow ow ow ow ow!" Xander wailed.

"How long can he keep yelling like that?" Oz asked mildly despite the furrow of concern on his brow.

"I'd imagine until he loses his voice," Giles answered in distraction. He thumbed through the book in his hands, cringing slightly when Xander emitted a particularly piercing shout. "Angel, when you said 'they're on their way,' you did mean that they'd be arriving any moment, yes?"

"The demon who is going to help out just had to stop by to pick up --" Angel began before he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Oz went to the entrance and turned the knob cautiously. Standing on Giles's threshold was a nine-foot tall dark green demon. Its jaws were massive, and heavy-looking scales covered it from enormous head to clawed feet. While the group waited in stunned silence, it stepped inside just as some sort of slime hanging by a thread from its exposed incisors dropped onto the carpet with a distinct *splish*. A sound, not unlike the roll of thunder in the distance, emerged from its broad chest.

"Oh my god," Xander breathed.

"Hi," said a short man who had been standing behind the demon. He nodded to everyone amiably and adjusted his backwards baseball cap. "I'm Hank, and this here is Gustave."

"Gustave?" Buffy asked. Oz very slowly moved away from the door and went to stand next to Buffy.

"Loose translation," the man shrugged. "You can just say 'Gus'." He pulled off his jacket and draped it on one of the chairs while Gus followed him with squelching sounds.

"Not that I mind seeing you, er, Hank, but . . . who are you?" Spike asked. He had wrapped his arms around Xander, and Xander made a small, strangled sound in protest when Spike squeezed too tightly. "Sorry, pet," Spike whispered.

"Human liaison," Hank answered helpfully. "The Glaz'broth understand non-demonic languages pretty well, but their jaws and teeth, not to mention their double tongue, make it hard to pronounce any words but their own."

"Double tongue?" Oz asked with raised eyebrows.

Buffy shook her head as though to clear it. "Okay, Hank . . . Gus. Let's get this thing started. What do we do?"

Gus barked jovially.

"Gus says first things first. Where's our little spawn carrier?" Hank asked.

Xander uncertainly raised his hand.

"Wow, right," Hank said. "We should've been able to tell from the door, huh? You're really showing there."

"Is this going to take a long time?" Xander asked. Giles had brought the mixture over to the coffee table, and was awaiting further instruction, while Angel and Buffy hovered at strategic points near the demons. "I mean, the pain part?"

"Oh, I'm thinking not more than three days," Hank answered. When Xander's jaw dropped, Hank laughed. "Nah, I'm joshin' you. You'll be all set in the next hour for the whole thing."

"Uh . . . an hour of completely devastating pain?" Xander asked.

"Oh, no, definitely not," Hank said. "Gus?"

Gus approached the couch, both of its fore-claws raised in the air. Xander unthinkingly squirmed further into the cushions and then went rigid when another set of contractions apparently struck.

"Perhaps you could tell us what, er, Gus . . . is going to do, to set our minds at ease," Giles said.

"Sure thing," Hank said. He cast a worried look at Xander. "Gus is just going to lay its claws on the spawn carrier and remove the pain."

"And . . . the baby?" Giles asked faintly.

"Yeah, the baby too," Hank said. Gus gave a loud rumble and Hank listened patiently. "Right, but not before the spell part."

"I don't know if I like being called 'spawn carrier'," Xander muttered once he had recovered enough to speak.

"I don't know if I like the baby being called 'spawn'," Spike put in.

"I'm telling you, the phrase sounds way sweeter when you hear it in Glaz'broth," Hank told him. "Now just relax for a sec, and Gus'll take good care of you."

Xander gripped Spike's hand tightly. Spike screwed his face up, as though he was doing his best not to growl. Gus leaned forward with a clicking sound and then with a surprisingly gentle gesture, laid its claws on Xander's abdomen.

Xander gasped and then exhaled slowly. "It's . . . wow. I feel it, but it doesn't hurt at all anymore. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

Gus blinked its bulging eyes at Xander in what seemed like a friendly way, and then turned to wave a claw at Hank.

"Let's start spreading that stuff on him," Hank directed Giles.

"Anywhere in particular?" Giles asked.

Gus opened its jaw and wagged its tongues at Giles.

"Trunk, Gus says," Hank translated. "On his stomach, I mean."

"I'll do it," Spike said, and began smoothing the mixture onto Xander's skin. "Be over soon, love," he said to Xander as he scooped out more of the combined ingredients.

"Okay," Xander whispered. He rested his hand on Spike's while Spike carefully spread the paste. Then he paused and sniffed. "You know, I thought it'd be totally nasty. And it looks nasty, but . . . it smells *minty*."

"Well, the mint extract was in the cupboard next to the Rhodiola serum," Giles explained. "I confused the two momentarily."

"Hey, I think it's a nice touch," Hank said.

"Er, thank you," Giles replied. "And now?"

Gus made a thick sound, not unlike that of a 300-pound weight being plunged into a vat of taffy.

"Now we need to ask everyone to leave," Hank said with a friendly smile.

"What? No!" Buffy said. "Xander is our friend, and if you think that we're going to leave him here with you--"

"I hardly think you can expect us simply to follow everything you--," Giles said at the same time.

"I'm not going anywhere, I can tell you that," Spike said loudly and decisively.

"Why do you want us to leave?" Oz asked curiously.

Gus and Hank exchanged glances. "Thought the vampire told you about that already?" Hank asked.

Angel cleared his throat. "Uh. I may have forgotten to mention that part."

Buffy sighed. "Okay. Spill."

"Couple of things," Angel said. "One, the Glaz'broth don't mind helping with the birth, but they don't want anyone else to witness the ritual that makes it possible."

"Oh," Giles said with evident disappointment. "Well, I suppose that is their right."

"I think it's crazy. How can we protect Xander if we're not in the same room as him?" Buffy asked.

"Buffy, I think we can trust them," Xander said slowly. "Gus got the pain to stop, and it's not like the Glaz'broth have anything to gain from hurting me or the baby."

"All the same, I am *not* leaving you while this is happening," Spike said fiercely.

Gus clicked at Hank and then opened its jaws.

"Oh, yeah, of course. Gus says that *you* can stay," Hank said to Spike.

"That's the other part," Angel put in. "The two who began this -- the two affected by the spells, who bonded and created the -- "

"Spawn," Hank supplied helpfully.

"Baby," Spike said in a firm voice.

"The ones who created the baby are the only ones who can be in the room besides the deliverer," Angel continued.

"Oh, well," Spike said briskly. "That's okay then." He waved them towards the door. "Give us a bit of privacy, you lot."

"So . . . you just want us to wait outside?" Buffy asked. "After all of this craziness of waiting and watching and helping and *worrying*?"

"That'd be great," Hank said. "I'm headed out with you -- I can't be here either for the during part."

Gus rumbled again. But it was clearly meant as a persuasive rumble, and Xander seemed mostly unperturbed by it. When he looked up at Spike briefly for reassurance, Spike stooped and kissed his forehead and then his lips. At that the others quieted, and Hank was able to herd them outside.

* * *

"I don't like this," Buffy said.

"Shouldn't be much longer," Hank said.

"Well, it's been quite a while already," Giles said as he continued to walk back and forth along the courtyard.

"It's been forty minutes," Oz remarked from his perch on the courtyard table.

"See?" Hank asked. "Only forty minutes."

"Longest forty minutes ever," Buffy murmured as she again glanced at the closed apartment door.

Angel put his hands on her shoulders. "If they said an hour, then forty minutes . . . it should be okay."

Giles looked at his watch, and then shook it. "It's just that I've never been in this type of situation before."

Buffy raised her eyebrows. "Giles, I think it's pretty safe to say that *no one* has been in this type of situation before."

"Oh, no, not even the fact that a male human is about to give birth, but the entire . . ." Giles stopped his pacing and waved his hand vaguely. "Baby arrival."

"Makes sense that it'd be a thing for you," Oz said with a shrug. "You're like the grandpa."

Giles paled visibly. "Dear lord."

"Well, you and Angel," Oz qualified.

"What?" Angel asked in confusion. "I'm . . . what?"

"Oh my god," Buffy shouted.

"I'm not the grandpa," Angel muttered.

"No, no, not that," Buffy said. "Willow! Nobody's called Willow to tell her that Xander's about to give birth, and the baby's almost *here*, and oh my god, she's going to *kill us all* with one of her fancy new spells that she learned at the Wiccan Unification Summer Session!"

Oz's eyes widened slightly.

Then there was an extremely loud squishing sound, and the apartment door opened. Gus stood there, blinking at all of them.

"Is everything--" Giles began.

Gus shook slightly. One of its scales fell to the ground with a clattering sound. Then it turned and lumbered back inside.

"Oh dear," Giles said.

"Don't mind Gus," Hanks shrugged. "It's just a little overwhelming, the delivery. Gets you all choked up. Or, depending on things, makes you shed scales. Let's head on in."

Buffy took the first step towards the door and everyone else fell in behind her. "Guys?" she said quietly from the threshold.

Xander was still lying on the couch, though he was now half-propped up on pillows. Spike had squeezed in next to him, his arm curled around Xander's shoulders possessively. And lying on Xander's chest wrapped in a towel and yawning like a kitten, was the baby.

"Wow," Oz said.

"Hey," Xander said cheerfully. "Would you believe it wasn't so bad? Still, I'm so never doing that again."

"Once, definitely enough," Spike agreed, and the two of them smiled at one another.

"Wow. Baby," Buffy said, pointing.

"Our baby," Spike corrected her, tightening his arm around Xander.

"Spike, calm down. They're not going to steal the baby," Xander admonished him. Even so, he clutched the baby closer to his chest.

"It's so little. And not crying. And clean," Oz said.

"I tell you, the magical delivery is the way to go," Xander said. "No muss, no fuss, just poofing, all like Buffy said. Plus I've got my pre-baby figure back now, thanks to Gus's magic claws." He grinned but then cleared his throat. "And if you ever hear me refer to my body as a 'figure' again, please hit me upside the head."

"Lucky you," Buffy grinned. "If they only knew, millions of women would scowl in your general direction."

"He'll still have the stretch marks, though," Hank said from the other side of the room.

Xander's face fell. "Really? Damn."

"It -- what kind of baby is it?" Angel asked warily.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Hello? It's human. What did you think? Just because I got pregnant through a bizarre and unbeknownst-to-me perfectly performed ritual involving a magic box of glitter and fluff that you made me and Spike pick up so you could broker a truce in a war between demon clans doesn't mean that the baby is a demon." He paused and then nodded towards Gus. "No offense."

Gus blinked and then with a cooing sound laid one claw very gently on the baby's head. The baby sighed and closed its eyes.

"I'm guessing Angel was thinking more along the lines of girl or boy," Buffy said when Gus had rumbled at Spike and Xander and moved off towards Hank. "But anyone can tell that it's a girl."

"And you would wager the baby is a girl why?" Giles asked.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "I just know. It's probably some kind of Slayer-sense that I have, being able to figure that kind of thing out." She moved to the couch, smiling when the baby yawned once more. "She's *very* pretty."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Buff," Xander grinned. "But what we have here is a baby boy."

"A baby boy," Angel repeated as he stepped closer.

"And not a demon," Xander added.

"Though of course his conception was far from typical, he certainly appears to be a normal baby," Giles said. When he put his finger out, the baby immediately curled his tiny fingers around it. "But time will tell us more."

" 'Appears normal' is good enough for now, as long as he doesn't age at some crazy rapid pace." Xander cupped the baby's head after the baby had sneezed and then had seemed surprised. "Because the pregnancy was pretty damn quick."

"Based on the information we've found, and what Hank was good enough to tell me while we were waiting, the baby should follow the normal course of human development," Giles assured him.

"Well that's a relief. It'd be freaky to try to impose curfews on a guy twenty years older than me." Xander tucked the towel in more snugly around the baby, who promptly fell asleep.

"I'm here, I'm here," Willow blurted out as she burst into Giles' apartment. "I was channeling with my coven, and we could feel the energies collecting around Xander when I focused on his aura, so I started out right away, and then . . . oh," she said in surprise as she saw the group of them gathered around Spike and Xander and the baby. "I wanted to help . . . but . . . yay?"

"Very yay," Buffy said with a grin. "Don't worry about missing the pre-show; you're here for the everything-after part."

"But I promised I'd be back in time!" Willow said. Oz drew her close and pulled her into a hug.

"Well, you didn't miss all of it," Buffy reassured her. "You didn't miss . . . well, okay you did miss

the . . . and then there was the . . . hmmm. Oh! He doesn't have a name yet."

"He? It's a little baby boy?" Willow asked, her eyes starting to tear up.

Oz squeezed her hand. "So guys, any boy names under discussion?"

Xander looked at Spike. "We were thinking Zachary."

"Zachary, huh?" Willow sat down on the floor next to the couch and brushed her fingers over the baby's cheek. She smiled when he fussed a little but remained asleep. "That works. It's a big name to grow into. And yet it's also nickname-ready."

"Well, we should take off," Hank said. He and Gus were already standing by the door. Gus held up a claw and gave a little wave.

"Oh," Willow said in a faint voice as she took in Gus. "Glaz'broth?"

"Glaz'broth," Oz said with a nod.

"Thank you so much for your help," Giles said.

"Yeah, thanks," Spike added gruffly. "Couldn't have done it otherwise."

"No thanks necessary," Hank said. Gus made a rattling sound and shook. "Well, maybe a little thanks," Hank acknowledged.

"Hey, wait. I was thinking," Xander began. "If Gus wouldn't mind -- we've got the first name, but maybe as a way to remember the very scary birth-giving situation you helped us out with -- how about we use the name Gustave for Zachary's middle name?"

Gus took a thundering step back into the apartment and dropped another scale.

"That means he's pleased, yes?" Giles asked in an aside to Angel.

"Gustave?" Buffy said in an undertone to Xander. "You sure about that? That's some middle name."

"No worse than Lavelle," Xander replied.

"Yeah," Hank said. "Yeah, Gus here would be honored." Gus clicked and then rumbled. "And naming your baby after a Glaz'broth, that brings with it the protection of the clan."

"Bonus," Oz said.

"Okay, nice meeting you all," Hank said with a grin. Gus opened its jaw and waggled its tongues, and they left.

"So," Spike said in the pause that followed.

"So," Xander echoed, smiling at Zachary, who had woken up somewhere in the middle of the name discussion.

"So what happens now?" Buffy asked.

"Uh . . . I guess the whole baby raising thing," Xander said. He laughed and slumped back against the pillows. "Kind of funny, huh? Been so focused on the baby getting here, and now,

here he is. I'm not really sure what happens for the rest of it."

"The rest of it we'll just have to find out along the way," Spike said. He reached out and smoothed away a lock of Xander's hair from his forehead, and then stroked the baby's arm. "You know. See if he gets tiny fangs. Sprouts scales. Or maybe becomes a superhero."

"He's not going to sprout scales," Xander said firmly. "Neither of us has scales anywhere, and there's no Glaz'broth in this guy."

"But the fangs, that wouldn't be so bad, yeah?" Spike asked.

"Guys?" Oz broke in. "I know all that future stuff is important. But I think for now we have to deal with the fact that this is pretty much the cutest baby I've ever seen."

"Yes he is. Yes you *are* the cutest baby," Buffy said as she leaned over the back of the couch. "He's strong, too," she noted just after the baby had flailed, grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked hard.

"He seems quite intelligent already," Giles put in, giving the baby a soft tap on the nose and smiling when the baby wrinkled his nose in response.

"He's quiet," Angel said approvingly.

"He looks just like me," Spike said, running his fingers across the smattering of fine blond hair on the baby's head.

"Oh, that could all fall out, the hair," Xander said. "Besides, he's got my nose."

"And your ears," Oz affirmed, gently touching one of the pink shells that stuck out from the baby's head.

"He's just the best baby ever," Willow said with a grin.

"Damn right," Spike agreed.

"Not going to argue," Xander said.

"Let anybody try it," Buffy added.

"Just let them," Angel said fiercely.

Everyone looked at him.

"Well." Angel shifted uncomfortably. "I'm kind of like the grandfather."

"I thought that was my position," Giles said in confusion.

Spike looked at Xander, who just raised his hands in a "who knows?" gesture.

"He's a pretty lucky baby," Xander said. "Having bunches of wacky aunts and uncles. And, uh, kind of grandfathers."

"I see lots of babysitting in all of our futures," Oz noted.

"Probably," Xander agreed. "But for now I'm seeing readier access to diapers and cribs and all the baby stuff back at the apartment." He stood carefully with Zachary and then stopped abruptly.

"Oh god. Car seat!"

"It's all set up," Buffy said. "It really was a long forty minute wait."

"Thanks," Xander said. He paused. "Seriously. For everything."

"Of course," Giles said.

"You don't have to talk like you're not going to see us again," Willow said. "We'll all come over tomorrow morning and see how Zachary is doing."

"You will?" Spike said. After a sharp elbow in the side from Xander he said, "Oh, sure you will," with a bit less resentment.

"Wave bye," Xander said, waving Zachary's hand for him. Zachary gurgled.

"Bye!" Buffy and Willow said together.

With Spike supporting and ushering Xander and Zachary along, the three of them departed.

"I must say, that was quite exciting," Giles remarked as he went to the kitchen to put on a kettle of water for tea. "I do hope that Spike and Xander can be persuaded to share a few key details of the ritual. Without, of course, betraying the trust of the Glaz'broth who helped us. But it would be most valuable for the purposes of research and future generations to have more details on the record about this particular magical incident. And I would ask that all of you turn in reports as well -- Oz on the computer findings, Angel and Buffy on their interactions with the demons, Willow on her channeling and focusing energy that allowed her to determine the birth was about to take place." He finished and turned back to the main room. "That way, the observations I record will be as complete as possible, and . . . er . . . hello?"

"We'll write reports and stuff tomorrow," Buffy promised from her position collapsed on the couch. Her eyes were already closed, and her head was tilting towards Angel's shoulder. Angel nodded and closed his eyes.

"Definitely tomorrow," Willow said from the chair where she and Oz were curled up together, from the looks of it already well on her way to being asleep.

"From the state you're all in, one would think it was all of you who had given birth," Giles said with a shake of his head as he went to prepare the tea.

~~**The End**~*~*

[Back to index](#)

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